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GRAHAM ASPEN, PAINTER.

VOL. II.

GRAHAM ASPEN, PAINTER

A NOVEL

BY

GEORGE HALSE

AUTHOR OF 'WEEPING FERRY,' ETC.

· The charities that soothe, and heal, and bless,
Lie scattered at the feet of men like flowers.'
WORDSWORTH.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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GRAHAM ASPEN, PAINTER.

CHAPTER I.

NEW TIES.

DR. EUSTACE watched the phases of Aspen's complaint with more than ordinary professional interest; for, as we know, he had discovered in the young man something beyond his pronounced characteristics and fine independence. His voice and his personality had, as it were, recalled to palpable existence a sister who had passed away; and the conviction that the resemblance was more than fortuitous which Eustace felt certainly gained confirmation in the statement about his family which the patient unreservedly made, unsuspecting as he was of the motives which prompted the physician to

catechise him so strictly on that point. His sister, Mildred, had, he was aware, married again after the decease of her husband, Sinclair ; but beyond that fact he knew nothing. Sinclair had estranged her from her kin, consequently she became lost sight of ; and the fact of her having had children by her second husband and that all save one were in their graves, together with both parents, was thus unknown to him. The information elicited from Graham at their first interview, that consumption had carried them off, one and all, was a startling disclosure. Pathologically it was remarkable ; personally it was most disquieting. He had never heard of the existence of the taint in his family, and now he suddenly learns that sister and children succumbed to the dire scourge. Its inception, progress and phthisical characteristics should, if possible, be known, both in the interests of science and for his private information. Fortunately an old colleague and fellow-student of his was in practice in Bombay, where his sister resided and died, and he lost no time in addressing to him certain questions requiring specific and authentic data as to the malady, and which he,

in his professional capacity, would have no difficulty in obtaining.

Meanwhile Aspen continued to justify the treatment resorted to by Dr. Eustace in conjunction with Alderman Clive, and scrupulously carried out by Jem, consisting mainly of nutritious soups and toothsome dishes from Birch's in Cornhill. With returning strength Aspen found new interests in life, and those growing interests centred in Jem. He felt as though his faithful companion and nurse had turned aside for the moment the grim intruder Death, and had opened before his aching eyes a bright vista of days to come; of companionship in the study of Nature and the subtleties of Art; and the development of the gifts with which his friend was so richly stored, and which it had been his privilege and his pride to discover and foster. Aspen found cheer and comfort in the thought that, ere the three years' lease of life promised him by Dr. Eustace ran out, he could in some measure make return to Jem for his affectionate care of him; but his debt to Dr. Eustace, and still more to Mr. Clive, weighed upon him. How could he give evidence of the gratitude he

felt to those gentlemen? Were he another Croesus he would not now for a moment dream of rewarding Eustace with vulgar coin; but he possessed within himself a fund beyond the reach of opulence: his hand and his pencil should some day pay the debt both to Eustace and Clive, if strength were only given him again.

And did Mr. Clive feel that Aspen was his debtor for these timely benefactions? His view was precisely the reverse. He was beholden to the young man for some of the most pleasurable moments he had experienced, and, as he paid him frequent visits and subsidised Mrs Starkie for his benefit, he watched his gradual convalescence with the anxiety of a father. When he considered him able to bear the news, he reminded him that the lost sketch-book was safe, and, as the best possible evidence of the fact, he drew it from his pocket and placed it in the astonished artist's hands.

Had Mr. Clive restored a lost jewel of great worth it could hardly have afforded the young man such extreme pleasure as he evinced in repossessing those precious notes of his fugitive impressions. It contained the condensed record of truthful

observation when his art-faculty was keen, and within its narrow compass lay the germs of works to be created. His first act was to open it at the page containing his sketch from Nature of 'The Sisters,' and there he found striking confirmation of Jem's objections to the picture recently painted.

Calling his friend he said,

'Jem, my boy, you thought it idiotic of me to destroy the painting which I did from memory. Here is my justification for that act. The light from the setting sun and the shadows of the trees are exactly where you said they should have been, and where they were not in the picture. This proves that your natural sense of truth is superior to my schooled and cultivated eye. Mr. Clive,' added Graham, turning with a beaming face to his visitor, 'I am glad to admit in your presence that my pupil is already my master.'

'I think the pupil may dissent from that statement,' replied Mr. Clive, merrily.

'Mr. Aspen is so good, he talks in that manner to encourage me,' explained Jem, blushing at the speech he felt forced to make. 'Every-

body understands that he says such things out of pure kindness of heart.'

'Not having had an opportunity of seeing your pupil's performances, I am not able to confirm or to contradict your assertion, but if he can paint a better picture than the "Queen of the Glen" I will admit all you say. And the allusion to that lovely painting brings me to one of the objects of my visit. The "Queen of the Glen," which was on sale at Glare and Gooley's, is in the possession of a young lady of my acquaintance named Lipperty, and a desire has been expressed that her portrait be painted. I have ventured to recommend that you, Mr. Aspen, be engaged to do it.'

Mr. Clive had scarcely completed his speech when Jem actually danced for joy. At length, he thought, something is happening to cheer his beloved master. The sketch-book is restored to him, and now, close upon that, comes a commission for a picture, and all these unforeseen strokes of fortune following his returning health—best stroke of all! Had these good things fallen to Jem's own lot, he would not have exulted so much, as Aspen knew quite well.

Aspen, on the other hand, made no demonstration, and, for several moments, no reply. He thought he saw in these welcome events the beneficent hand of Mr. Clive, and he hesitated to make the grateful response which rose to his lips. Under other circumstances, and with almost any other person, his spirit of independence might have led him to decline an offer which, however gracefully made, was charity; but the hesitation passed away the moment he looked in Mr. Clive's earnest face. What right had he, Graham, to check the kindly current of his good deeds? He himself knew there is nothing so sweet as the act of administering to the necessities of others; it would be nothing less than boorish of him to meet Mr. Clive's intentions ungraciously.

‘I am but a poor hand, sir, at making speeches,’ he said, in tones that betrayed much feeling, ‘but you may measure my gratitude for all your goodness by Jem’s joy. We share each other’s fortunes, good and bad, but I fear I’m only a “sleeping partner” in the business!’

‘I’m more than gratified that you accept the commission. But I have now to ask your

pardon for having fixed the price without first consulting you ; the fact is, I am a business man, and was desirous of having the matter settled, and your patron expressed the same wish. I therefore named a hundred guineas, and that sum was agreed upon at once.'

Aspen could scarcely believe himself awake,—the amount seemed simply fabulous, and the whole incident nebulous and impossible. As for Jem, he was only just able to rush outside the door when he burst into tears—tears of unqualified joy—and sent up to Heaven a tribute of thanks in his own simple way.

'But, dear sir,' remonstrated Graham, in grave perplexity, 'I should not have named the half or the quarter of that sum.'

'That only proves that your estimate of your work and that of others don't agree. I think, in this instance, you must give way. When will you take a sitting?' and Mr. Clive spoke with a decision which compelled a distinct reply.

'Whenever convenient to the lady,' answered Graham, mechanically, and without reflection.

'Shall we say to-morrow?'

‘Yes, to-morrow,’ replied the artist, perfunctorily, turning over the leaves of his sketch-book.

‘At noon?’

‘Whenever agreeable to the lady.’

‘Good;’ and Mr. Clive took leave of the young man before he quite realised the fact that he was under engagement to commence his first portrait from life within a few hours.

Mr. Clive had a still more delicate mission to carry through: he had to prevail upon Lena to sit. On reaching home, he found the two girls, violins in hand, busy with their positions and scales.

‘Miss Lipperty,’ he said, after complimenting her upon the extraordinary progress she had made in a few months, ‘you will be pleased to hear that the gifted painter of the “Queen of the Glen” has a commission for a portrait.’

‘I am indeed gratified to hear it; he is certain to do it well. Is it a lady or a gentleman?’

‘A lady, and one you know perfectly well.’

‘Indeed!’ and, after a moment’s thought, she added with unaffected delight, ‘it is Ethel!’

‘No.’

‘But I know no one else—it *must* be you, dear.’

‘It is not I. The fortunate girl is a very dear friend of mine,’ replied Ethel, laughing.

Lena ran down the list of those friends of Ethel whom she knew, but failed to guess aright.

‘I give it up,’ she said at length; ‘tell me who it is, dear.’

‘Don’t you think a girl is to be envied the advantage of having her portrait painted by so clever an artist?’

‘Well, dear Ethel, I cannot say that envy is a feeling we ought to admit, but I confess I consider it a privilege to sit to so gifted a man,’ answered Lena; adding, ‘why not tell me who the fortunate girl is?’

‘As it seems to interest you so greatly, I will not delay to gratify your curiosity. It is my dear Lena’s face Mr. Aspen is engaged to paint.’

Lena started; the sudden announcement thrilled her in a manner hard to define. Was it

pleasure? was it vexation? was it a secret wish gratified? was it confusion? Lena could not have assented to either postulate; she was only conscious of surprise. Turning to Mr. Clive she met his smiling face and a gesture confirmatory of Ethel's statement.

‘It is all arranged,’ he said, ‘if you will consent to sit.’

‘But why, sir, have you arranged it?’

‘For the gratification of Mrs. Sparragus;’ and Mr. Clive, observing Lena’s expression of incredulity and wonder, explained that Mrs. Sparragus, desiring to benefit the gallant hero of her rescue, had decided to commission a portrait, and had herself named Lena as the only friend whose face it would be a pleasure to her to have always before her.

Two such sufficient reasons,—a timely service to a worthy man and a mark of esteem for herself—decided Lena to assist in so gracious an act, and she signified as much in a few simple words; but when Mr. Clive, with his inveterate practicality and promptitude in matters of business, intimated that the preliminary sitting was

fixed for the morrow, Lena's courage failed her, and, offering excuses, she retired to her room, whither Ethel followed her.

‘How will it end?’ asked Mr. Clive of himself, as he rightly interpreted the young girl's discomposure, ‘she has pondered so much on what she heard of this young man that her sympathies with him are dangerously alive. Was it wise of me to force her into his society? May not her happiness be involved in this matter? I can only hope it will end well.’

Lena, on her return home, informed her step-mother that she had been requested to sit for her portrait by Mrs. Sparragus, and that model of outward propriety was even more scandalised than she had been with regard to the violin.

‘A painting of you! Why, the woman must be getting foolish in her old age; and I'm only surprised—I mean to say, I'm not in the least surprised, Leonora Jane, at your lending yourself to such vanities. Mrs. Sparragus knew better than to ask *me* to sit; if she had, I should very soon have explained to her the folly, and I may say, the sin of it. Oh! it's enough to

make your poor dear father turn in his grave! Faugh! I'm shocked!

But her indignation reached its culminating point when she learned that the artist to be employed was the very man who had saved Mrs. Sparragus from imminent danger.

'What, sit to that starveling! Sit in *his* garret day after day, to be stared at! Bah! But I might have expected it. Fiddling leads naturally to this sort of thing; and then there's no stopping your downward career. Well, Leonora Jane, I'm sure my dull house can't suit your tastes now; and, I assure you, I'm not going to adapt my habits to these wild ideas. I hope I have too much self-respect for that, Leonora Jane;' and a good deal more in the same vein.

Lena had, of late, been enjoying the gentle and refined intercourse of her friends, and found it hard to endure a continuance of the strictures and animadversions which had hitherto been administered as regularly as her daily bread; and the present coarse onslaught called into activity the spirit which had been subjugated, but not extinguished.

'Mamma,' she said, with perfect self-control,

‘we have very often spoken our feelings freely to one another, and, unhappily, we differ in almost everything.’

‘Yes; we could hardly differ more,’ replied the exemplary lady, with acerbity.

‘That being so, I have made up my mind to accept an offer of my friends to take up my abode with them, and thus relieve you of a burden you have borne too long.’

There was a decision and finality in Lena’s utterance which startled Mrs. Lipperty. Evidently there was no argument which she was capable of employing in the least likely to shake her resolution. But the fact of Lena quitting home would be nothing less than a scandal, and Mrs. Sparragus, who proved her regard for her by ordering her portrait, would of course take her part; then good-bye to all the expectations she had so long nursed. The old woman would be sure to substitute Lena’s name for hers, or, perhaps (folly almost as great), she would leave all her property to a hospital. She must appeal to her tender feelings.

‘My dear Lena,’ she answered, ‘I fully appreciate your delicacy, but you hardly consider

the consequence of such a step to me. True, I'm only your step-mother, but you are my only precious child, and it would break my heart to be deserted by you.'

'I think, mamma, you exaggerate the sorrow my absence would cause you. On the contrary, I hope that, with your love for me, you will be resigned, when you know I am with those who will treat me well.'

Mrs. Lipperty pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, in evidence of emotion too deep for words but not for supposititious tears. Ultimately, she was able to gasp,

'Is there never to be an end of my trials? Oh, that the child of my Ebenezer should at last forsake me!'

But Lena, untouched by the pathos, unsubdued by the censure, quietly rose, and saying, with perfect good-humour, 'Mamma, it is for the best, and you will think so, if you love me,' retired to her room, leaving Mrs. Lipperty gnashing her teeth, and giving utterance to inarticulate phrases, which were evidently not benedictions, for they wound up with a distinct anathema: 'Drat the girl!'

The following day, when Lena and Ethel met for their customary practice, Ethel remarked an unusual absence and inability on the part of her friend to concentrate her attention on her study, and so preoccupied and oppressed did she appear, that Ethel, laying aside her violin, embraced her affectionately, asking the cause of her sadness.

‘You and your good and generous father have many times offered to receive me into your family.’

‘Yes, and, to our sorrow, you have always refused.’

‘Is it too late to withdraw my refusal?’

‘Too late!’ cried Ethel, in a transport of hope, ‘how could it be too late? Say you accept, dear.’

‘I consent to come as your—companion; I will remain in your service as long as you care to have me, then I will leave.’

‘No, no, you will come as my sister!’ and Ethel seized Lena in her arms. ‘As my sister, never to part!’ and the orphan girl buried her face in her friend’s bosom, shedding tears of gratitude and joy.

When Mr. Clive returned later in the day,

Ethel led her friend by the hand to him, saying,

‘Papa, Lena has at last consented to our wish. We are sisters. She will make this her home.’

Mr. Clive folded the two fair girls in one embrace, saying, with evident emotion,

‘May the sweet companionship endure many, many years!’ and, with fatherly tenderness, he kissed each daughter on the forehead.

The faces of the two girls, radiant with happiness, were close together before him, challenging involuntary comparison, and Mr. Clive could not help observing how greatly Ethel’s round and rosy face contrasted with Lena’s, which was pale and somewhat careworn, while a darkness round the orbit of the eyes indicated the absence of perfect health.

‘You do not feel quite well, my child?’ he said, inquiringly, with the utmost compassion.

‘Oh, yes, I am well,—quite well!’ replied Lena, smiling. But the next moment she burst into tears.

CHAPTER II.

PAINTER AND SITTER.

HAD the matter of the proposed portrait rested with Graham, it is not unlikely that it might have been adjourned to the Greek Calends; but Jem with great sagacity constituted himself the ruling spirit in this particular, and took the most direct steps to give effect to Mr. Clive's arrangement for a sitting on the morrow by putting everything in readiness. Jem, though not as yet deeply versed in human character, seemed to be conscious that ladies, not to say mankind in general, sometimes change their minds, and that plans postponed are as good as plans abandoned altogether. Therefore, when Graham rose in the morning, he found the studio portion of his chamber set off to the best

possible advantage, and adapted, so far as their modest properties admitted, for a lady's presence. A throne was extemporised and canvas placed; chalks and charcoal, paint, pencils and palette were ranged conveniently for the artist's hand, and the few objects of interest and beauty possessed by Graham were judiciously placed with a view to effect.

'My dear Jem,' cried the painter, surveying the scene with admiration, 'as you have made so brilliant a beginning, you had better go on with the job while I look on and take a lesson.'

'Have I done too much?' timidly inquired Jem, interpreting his master's remark as deprecatory.

'On the contrary, you have shown excellent taste in arranging our properties.'

Jem blushed.

'I can see the hand of an artist in every detail. You put this old cuirass in the corner to lighten its gloom. That bit of Japanese blue is to tell against the grey background, and that amber scarf stands out invaluable against the black velvet jacket. The sketches and

studies in the foreground complete the composition.'

Jem, in great confusion, stammered that he did it all by chance.

'No, Jem, it was not chance. It was unconscious intuition. My room is a picture for the first time, and, if you care to please me, you will paint it exactly as it is. I set you the task.'

Jem's heart beat audibly, and he was about to respond gratefully to his master's commendation when Mrs. Starkie entered the room with Aspen's modest breakfast. The change in the appearance of the room caught her eye in a moment, and she stood gazing in wonderment. At length her feelings found expression :

'This is one of your tricks, Jem, and I wonder how you dare! To think you should go and litter Mr. Aspen's room just as you do your own! Look at the floor! Why, I never saw such a mess in all my life,—except in your bedroom! And that bit of armour taken down from the wall and not even dusted! and the china jars taken out of the cupboard where they were packed away safe! I'm sure, Mr.

Aspen, you must have the temper of an angel to keep our Jem and allow him to take such liberties! Oh, what a job I shall have to get things straight again!

‘My dear Mrs. Starkie,’ replied Graham, vastly amused, ‘we artists are an untidy tribe, and are, I fear, incurable. Jem, you see, has caught the disease, but, if it doesn’t spread beyond this room, I don’t think it can distress you very much. When I wish it tidied, I will make him do it; but for the present I prefer it being left exactly as it is.’

‘What, Mr. Aspen, with all those pictures and things on the floor, and that armour with dust on it an inch thick!’

‘I’m ashamed to say that, if the dust were even two inches thick, I would rather not have the armour touched.’

Mrs. Starkie had her own private opinion of Mr. Aspen’s ideas of domestic propriety, but she refrained from giving it expression, as she glanced at the house opposite and saw by the bill in the window that the apartments were still to let.

Punctually to the hour appointed, Mr. Clive’s

carriage drove up, and Graham received his visitors with grace, if not with the cordiality which is born of confidence. It was his first professional engagement, and Mr. Clive, noting his embarrassment, thought it better to withdraw, promising to return in a couple of hours.

Ethel was greatly interested and vivacious, sustaining conversation when it flagged, assisting and encouraging her friend, and doing her utmost to put both artist and sitter at ease. Lena, on the other hand, was bashful and silent; she spoke in whispers to Ethel, and seemed scarcely able to raise her eyes to Graham. Ethel rightly interpreted this: it arose from the gratification of a long-cherished desire to see the hero of Mrs. Sparragus's adventure and the painter of the 'Queen of the Glen.' Lena had formed a conception of the man from the slightest materials, and she felt a pleasure akin to joy in finding that he did not fall short of her idea. Hence the quietude of her demeanour; hence her diffidence and gravity,—her joy was a secret not to be betrayed.

Aspen seized a pose which Ethel pronounced characteristic of his sitter. He sketched in the

head slightly turned and inclined, the eyes cast down. This also met with Ethel's approval. It was, moreover, a treatment with which the artist sympathised; it is probable he would have failed had Ethel been his subject. With unerring precision he caught the features and expression, and when, at the expiration of the time arranged, Mr. Clive returned, he was surprised at the progress made, and the promise of success was the theme of conversation for the remainder of the day.

Mr. Clive was curious to know all particulars connected with the sitting.

‘Mr. Aspen is, no doubt, a very clever artist, papa,’ said Ethel; ‘but, do you know, he scarcely spoke the whole time we were there.’

‘He is not a man accustomed to the society of ladies, I think, and is a poor hand at small talk,’ answered Mr. Clive in explanation.

‘Then we should have been thankful for talk of some other kind,’ rejoined Ethel, laughing. ‘What say you, Lena?’

‘I was quite satisfied, dear, because I dare say if he had entertained us with conversation, it

might have distracted his attention from his work.'

'That is precisely my notion,' said Mr. Clive; 'an artist should be wholly and absolutely absorbed in his art to the exclusion of all surroundings.'

'Perhaps, as the portrait advances, Mr. Graham will be less engrossed with his study, and we may hear the sound of his voice. I think Lena would not object to some little interchange of ideas with this clever man—eh, Lena?'

'As I said before, dear Ethel, I am quite satisfied, though, no doubt, Mr. Aspen's conversation would be very instructive.'

The sittings were repeated on alternate days, and the portrait advanced under Aspen's skilful hand with remarkable rapidity. But the hours devoted to the sittings grew more and more dull and tedious to Ethel. The artist, around whom a veil of mystery had been cast, and upon whom, in consequence, a romantic interest had centred, proved disappointing; as an artist he was a great success, but socially he was a failure. He worked with amazing assiduity, but the silence

which reigned during the process was most depressing. The painter had no idea that his visitors could find it irksome, and he made no attempt to dispel the tedium by even the cheap device of allusion to the weather or other topics of the day. He threw himself absolutely into the study of the outward Lena without betraying the smallest curiosity as to the Lena within. Ethel fully expected that the sweet, pensive and delicate face would call into existence in the mind of the platonic artist something approaching to interest; nay, she foresaw the possibility, not to say probability, of the painter succumbing to the unconscious charm of the winsome girl whose features he was portraying with such devoted zeal, and she watched curiously and impatiently for the dawning symptoms of passion. But, no; with all his enthusiasm for art he proved a very stoic. He threw himself into the study of Lena's face just as he would have studied a fair landscape or a lovely statue. He discovered in it harmonious form, refinement and peculiar grace, and with academic precision he endeavoured faithfully to transfer those rare qualities to his canvas. Even Jem, who, as his pupil and with

the ladies' permission, was allowed to be present, was not unmoved as he glanced from the calm, thoughtful face to its counterfeit, while his master, whose enviable privilege it was to gaze on it to his heart's content and look unbuked into her soft sad eyes, was content to con it over as something to be reproduced in paint.

To Lena the hours devoted to sitting were fraught with a placid contentment. In assuring Ethel that she was satisfied, she used no figure of speech; she was more than pleased in assisting a good and gifted artist to follow his profession and furnish his scanty purse; and to find herself in the society of one whom her imagination had endowed with every manly grace was more than gratification—it was joy, calm and secret, and the serenity of her demeanour and the seeming melancholy of her expression meant a condition of happiness too deep and too pure to be demonstrative.

Dr. Eustace, in the triple capacity of physician, friend and artist, called occasionally to interview the patient and inspect the work. As regarded the former, he was gratified with the

result of his prescription, generously dispensed by Mr. Clive with the assistance of Birch of Cornhill, and scrupulously administered by Jem. As to the portrait, it was excellent as a work of art, admirable as a likeness, and when, in answer to his enquiry, Aspen assured him it was his first serious work in portraiture, Dr. Eustace could hardly suppress an exclamation of incredulity, for he had too distinct a recollection of a peep he had surreptitiously obtained of a remarkable study of a head over which a veil was thrown.

‘Is it really your first portrait?’ he asked.

‘Yes, my first.’

Dr. Eustace was too frank and too much interested in the picture he had seen to hesitate to confess his sin in stealing a glance at the jealously guarded work, and with humorous contrition he pleaded guilty to having gratified an irresistible curiosity.

‘I conclude,’ he added, ‘that it is not a work of yours.’

‘It is mine,’ replied Graham, without betraying his surprise at the act, ‘it is an ideal study, nothing more.’

‘You surprise me. It struck me as marvellously true to life. In fact, the face has rather haunted me, for it seemed to recall the features of one who is no more.’

There was a pleading sadness in the physician’s words, so unusual with him, that both Graham and Jem were struck by it, and the latter, glancing expressively at his master, seemed to suggest that he should gratify his visitor with another sight of it, and Aspen, prompt to evince his respect and gratitude to the kind physician, at once produced the study from its hiding-place, and set it on an easel.

Instead of the comments Aspen awaited, and the commendations Jem expected, Dr. Eustace contemplated the work in silence for several minutes, and Jem, who stood near him awaiting the applause which he seemed so reluctant to bestow, was surprised to hear a saddened sigh.

‘There is an individuality about it,’ he said, after an interval, ‘which raises it above the level of ordinary creations of the imagination; but, being so, it would be interesting to analyse the mental process of its genesis. Were I to venture upon a conjecture, I should say your

inspiration is due, perhaps unconsciously, to the impression of a living reality.'

'It may have been so.'

'A beloved face is known to have so stamped itself upon a great painter's mind that it became his ideal, and, as such, was portrayed in all his creations. This beautiful study of yours is so replete with characteristics that I should suspect it is rather a reminiscence than an original conception—a reminiscence, possibly, of a sister or—a mother.'

Dr. Eustace anxiously scrutinised the young man's features. If, as he surmised from the resemblance and from facts he had elicited, Aspen was really Mildred's son, his words would call into activity feelings which could hardly be concealed, and the result was precisely what the sagacious physician anticipated. Graham did not immediately reply, but a pained expression in his face, a restlessness, a flashing eye, a flushed face told too clearly that the doctor's speculation had probed his heart sharply.

'Yes, sir; memory must have aided imagination. In my effort to conceive the face of a

perfect woman, unconsciously I limned the features of the only being I ever loved,—my mother.'

'She died, I think you informed me, at Bombay?' ventured the physician.

'Yes, of consumption. Her first husband, Sinclair, and my father, both died in India.'

This fact was conclusive. There was not the shadow of a doubt now that Dr. Eustace was in the presence of his sister's son. 'The natural act of most men under the circumstances would have been to make a dramatic scene on the spot, formulate felicitations on the happy recovery of the long-lost relative, and pledge themselves to an everlasting bond of good-will and affection. Dr. Eustace's habit of mind forbade hasty conclusion or impetuous action. He deliberated: 'Would it be wise and kind to spring upon this young man the astonishing fact? To one of his peculiar sensibility and independence of character the intelligence might prove hardly less than a shock. He had so long nursed the conviction that he was alone in the world that a condition of melancholia had developed in him, and it was far from certain

that a sudden discovery of this nature might not precipitate a crisis in his present delicate state of health.' The doctor therefore decided to postpone the announcement, more particularly as he was expecting from his old colleague at Bombay full replies to his categorical questions.

Pointing to the picture as he rose to leave, Dr. Eustace said,

'Should you ever be willing to part with it, I should be glad, at whatever price you might put upon it, to——'

The speech was never completed. A gesture of Graham's, an angry glance, a thrill as of pain arrested the words on the physician's lips, and he felt dominated by the unexpressed but peremptory refusal of the young artist to allow the ill-considered offer to be formulated. Taking leave of Graham with the best grace he could in his abashment command, he drove home.

Mr. Clive, true to his promise, arranged for Mrs. Sparragus to pay a visit to her preserver, which he had delayed till she could have the double satisfaction of seeing him and the portrait she had, unknown to him, commissioned.

When, on the appointed day, the alderman's brave equipage drew up, and Mr. Clive, leaving Ethel and Lena in the carriage, advanced to the door, the terrace was convulsed to its moral foundations. No. 1 and No. 3 discerned still more pernicious results traceable to that unfortunate circumstance in Cheapside, and fresh machinations against the well-to-do and confiding widow. No. 2, in the person of the widow herself, was divided between awe and exultation; and, in the person of Susan, was simply delirious, for she saw in it a huge stride in the direction of the happy event which she had long foreseen, and which, in her opinion, ought at once to be prepared for by the publication of the banns. Mrs. Sparragus, not having made the same discovery, was, notwithstanding her contending feelings, too serene, in Susan's view, for the occasion, and that damsel was ready to admonish her for her lack of enthusiasm at the approach of her adorer, so different from her own demeanour under similar circumstances. Her satisfaction, moreover, at seeing her mistress thus gallantly carried off was somewhat marred by the fact that the 'gent' was so oblivious of

his privileges that he failed to encircle the lady's waist with his arm and imprint an impassioned kiss upon her lips—a neglect of duty which she, Susan, could never forgive in her young man.

It would be hard to say which of the quartette in the carriage looked forward with the keener interest to the pending visit; but it is probable that Lena felt a placid joy while the others experienced satisfaction. She was proud to be something—if only a sitter—to the brave and gifted youth; and anything which did him honour seemed to reflect a modicum of honour upon her. She could not quite understand why she should feel this. Beyond the present momentary relationship existing between them, she was not even a friend; but somehow his good name was precious to her, and anything tending to his welfare made her happy. His very indifference to her, beyond her function as somebody to be painted, exalted him in her estimation,—he was superior to the common foible, and Lena forgot her moments of disappointment in her admiration of Aspen's Spartan impenetrability.

The artist received his visitors with his habitual grace,—grace which placed them at their ease without encouraging a nearer approach. Mrs. Sparragus, however, grasped his hand with an effusiveness which quite disconcerted Graham, who declared, with truth, that he had quite forgotten the event in Cheapside to which the worthy woman adverted with tears in her eyes; and her admiring gaze was so rivetted on the artist that she quite forgot the second object of her visit—namely, the portrait. When, at length, her attention was directed to it by Mr. Clive, she made ample amends for her tardiness by a perfect rhapsody.

‘Why, there’s Lena! Bless her heart! it’s her very self! Oh—look at her dear eyes, downcast and just a little sad! Beautiful! I’ve seen her look like that a hundred times. And her pale cheeks too! If ever there was a living likeness, that’s one!’ and Mrs. Sparragus, seeing the inconsistency of kissing the painting, kissed the blushing original again and again in evidence of her admiration of the counterpart.

Mr. Clive and Ethel appreciated this genuine

drama in silence, but Jem, not yet habituated to the decorous self-constraint of society, had a little comedy all to himself, and, not deeming himself altogether justified in testifying his delight at Graham's success in the same original manner as Mrs. Sparragus, clapped his hands and fairly danced in the exuberance of his feelings, to the astonishment of everybody.

‘You see, Mr. Clive,’ said Aspen, turning to the alderman and feeling called upon to explain Jem's histrionic exercise, ‘my pupil is as unconventional and natural in his manners as he is in his art. He aims at truth in painting, and is as incapable of disguise or affectation in act.’

The company, with one voice, proclaimed their admiration of such rare qualities, and Mr. Clive ventured to express a desire to see a sample of Jem's artistic skill, as he had viewed a sample of his physical performance. Thereupon Graham placed upon an easel Jem's representation of the studio in which they were assembled.

‘I have told my friend and pupil,’ said Gra-

ham, earnestly, 'that, however humble the subject of his study, the same art must be conscientiously and completely employed as in the rendering of the noblest design. He delights in sunsets, storms at sea, and other glorious phenomena; but I think it better that he should end with these grand phases of Nature instead of beginning with them; therefore I set him this poor, unpromising task. I will leave you to judge of his success.'

There could be but one opinion of the work, and the visitors accorded it the generous commendation to which it was justly entitled; Mrs. Sparragus, with the sharp eyes of a genuine housewife, was the first to point out its realistic merits:

'Look at the armour, it hasn't been dusted for months, and one of those blue jars is chipped! and the prints on the floor—how untidy! one on the top of another; and that bronze candlestick—why, I could take hold of it, it's so real! and who's this sitting with his back to us? Why, it's you, Mr. Aspen, painting dear Lena!'

'Yes,' replied Aspen, 'Jem wished it, and I

submitted, because I like an artist to have an absolute will, so far as his work is concerned.'

'I quite take your view,' answered Mr. Clive; 'the labour is his, the praise or blame will be his,—therefore the manner of carrying out the idea should be wholly his. But I don't understand why Mr. Starkie should not have given us the features of his revered master instead of the back of his head,' continued the alderman, with quiet humour.

'Oh, I can explain that,' interposed Ethel, archly; 'don't you see that he has painted Mr. Aspen gazing earnestly and anxiously into Lena's face, which is, of course, only right and natural; therefore he was obliged to represent him in this position.'

'Of course!' cut in Mrs. Sparragus, who grasped the situation with extraordinary intelligence, and desired to promote what she conceived to be an excellent understanding, fruitful of the happiest possibilities, between painter and sitter; 'you surely wouldn't have him turn his back upon such a sweet face as our Lena's! Why, it would be positively unnatural! and Mr. Jem knew what was the right thing to do ;

and there they sit, looking at one another, as they ought to do at their age.'

Lena felt just a momentary thrill of exultation at this lucid explanation, but when she glanced at Aspen, and saw on his placid countenance an utter absence of appreciation of Ethel's playful sally and Mrs. Sparragus's reflections, the thrill of joy gave way to a spasm of disappointment, which, however, she speedily reasoned away with her calm, unselfish habit; and when the visitors took leave of the artist, who escorted them to the carriage, no one except Mr. Clive, who had detected the fleeting thought, suspected that the sweet and lovable girl had endured a pang of exquisite mental suffering.

CHAPTER III.

THE NEOPHYTE.

‘SING me that song again, please ma’am; it sounds like Heaven.’

The voice, feeble and plaintive, thus speaking was that of a young girl of fourteen years, wasted, hollow-eyed, marked for the grave, as she lay on her little bed, her head propped up with pillows extemporised out of clothing, in a humble cottage in the neighbourhood of Flinders, tenanted by a small farmer and his wife, the parents of the sick child. On the bed and table near at hand loving hands had placed the wild flowers the sufferer used to find her happiness in culling in the green lanes and woods, with such fruits and dainties as the honest man

could command, while picture-books, entertaining and religious, texts emblazoned, even toys, were scattered about in the pious hope that they might attract the poor sufferer's attention and speed a ray of light and cheer to her heart in this dark hour. The lattice thrown open gave the young girl a clear view of the fast-setting sun, so typical of her closing life, which spread a singularly rich and glowing light over the western sky, and the sufferer's gaze, no longer careful of Art's devices, was fixed upon this wondrous spectacle. Whether it was that the glorious cloudscape recalled the song for which she pleaded, or whether the impression produced by the song made her more observant and appreciative of the scene before her, matters little.

Looking amazed at the sky, she pictured to herself the wonders beyond, and she asked for the song which seemed to recall heaven.

The person addressed was the nurse who had undertaken the care of her, too well aware that the utmost within the range of human power was to smooth the downward path and comfort the poor body in its exhaustion. The nurse,

moving about the room, noiseless, deft, unwearied, at once came to the bed-side, and, tenderly caressing the child, replied,

‘Martha dear, I was afraid my singing wearied you.’

‘Oh, no, Miss Tierney, that could never be.’

‘Then I will sing the song you like best;’ and Hester sang—

‘’Tis sweet to feel, when bowed with pain,
That ’tis the hand of Love which presses;
That loss of earthly ease is gain;
That Heaven in striking often blesses,
And that, perchance, our worst distresses
May purge away a stain.’

The young sufferer seemed almost in an ecstasy as the sweet, soft voice of the singer gave the words with perfect clearness and melody.

‘Do you feel that this is true, dear Martha?’ inquired Hester, leaning over her with moistened eyes.

‘Yes, I know it is true, Miss Tierney; and that’s why I am ill. It is to make me a better girl. Will you, please, sing the next verse, for that is true too.’

‘We live to learn that all below—
The wealth, the beauty, and the pleasure,
Will wither as the flowers that grow,
And mock us like a phantom treasure,
While, like an ocean without measure,
God’s gifts for ever flow.’

‘Yes, Miss Tierney,’ said the young girl, her large eyes flashing, and her thin lips moving without distinct articulation, ‘I like that too.’

‘Do you feel, dear child, that you are poor that you may be rich?’ inquired Hester, her speech lowered to a whisper.

‘I do, I do!’ replied Martha, in the same tone. ‘Go on, please,’ she added, quickly, as though time pressed.

‘I know and feel that even I,
A worm upon the highway creeping,
Shall wake again, although I die,
Beyond this world of want and weeping,
In Jesus’ safe and tender keeping,
In realms of joy on high.’

The poor child made no articulate response, but, by the motion of her lips, Hester understood—‘It is all true!’ and the sufferer, smiling, pressed her hand in token of gratitude. It was

a real joy to Hester to administer to the earnest and active mind as she administered to the prostrate body, and soothe to pious resignation a spirit in which youth and hope might have created regret if not revolt; and the gentle nurse could not repress her tears, as she kissed the burning lips of the dying girl. Suddenly, drawing a deep breath, Martha made a great effort to rise in her bed, and the hue which overspread her face roused Hester to a consciousness that the great change was at hand. Alarmed, she rushed from the room, and summoned Mrs. Beaver and the mother, who were busy in the kitchen, and who hastily sped to the bed-side.

Martha was sitting erect, with her arms stretched upward, her respiration spasmodic, her eyes glassy. And, as though her last breath should be dedicated to her Saviour, she repeated, distinctly and accurately, a line from the little song which Hester had composed for her, and sang, 'I shall awake, although I die, in Jesus' safe——' The exertion cost her her puny store of strength, and with it fled all knowledge, all suffering—everything,

except peace; and Martha sank back into Hester's arms, smiling, as her pure spirit winged its way to Eternity. Mrs. Beaver placed her hand in the region of the child's heart, and said, 'She is gone!' The mother broke into lamentations, and Hester, falling on her knees, commended the flitting, guileless spirit to the All-Merciful. And thus Hester's first service at a death-bed ended.

'My dear,' said Mrs. Beaver, when the gentle novice had regained her composure, 'one cannot but admire your overflowing sympathy, for it is beautiful; but really, Miss Tierney, you'll break down in health unless you bear these things more bravely.'

'I don't think I'm wanting in courage,' meekly expostulated Hester; 'I can't think it cowardly to feel.'

'No, my dear, we are bound to have proper feelings; but, if we are to break our hearts over every case we take in hand, there would soon be no nurses left.'

'Perhaps some day I shall grow indifferent in the presence of suffering, but I hope not.'

'You never will be indifferent, Miss Hester;

your nature is to pity, and with you pity is a passion. Dr. Eustace told me how intensely you felt once for a patient of his, a perfect stranger to you, who happened to faint in your presence.'

Hester's cheeks, till now pale with watching, were suddenly overspread with a deep flush; she made no reply.

'Not that I mean to say the young man's case wasn't one to touch the hardest heart when you know all,' continued Mrs. Beaver, meditatively.

Hester started; the flush retreated from her face, which was now ashy pale, and she demanded in tones of anxiety what there was unfavourable in his case.

'There, now, Miss Tierney, you see how ready you are to distress yourself over every trouble you hear of! and that's what I say is so bad for a nurse. A lamp, you know, that is for ever alight soon burns itself out.'

'But about the unfavourable——' insisted Hester.

'Ah, that's soon told. It appears the young man's parents and brother and sister were all

carried off by consumption, and Dr. Eustace doesn't give him more than three years.'

'Three years !'

'If he goes and catches colds. And I'm told he's one of those artists that go and sit out in the wet fields and damp woods painting pictures. Why, I call it downright sinful to tempt Providence so! Of course, he'll catch cold upon cold, for they say he's painting here at Flinders.'

'At Flinders!' echoed Hester, unable to conceal her surprise at the announcement.

'Yes; and I hear he's out in all weathers, so I fully expect he'll have inflammation of the lungs, and then it'll be three months instead of three years; and if I saw him sitting about, running such dreadful risks, I'd tell him my mind, that I would, for it's my duty.'

Hester seemed a prey to disturbing feelings as she listened to Mrs. Beaver's prognosis.

'Yes,' she replied, after a few moments' interval, 'I think it would be your duty to caution anyone incurring such serious risk.'

'And I'm very much disposed, now that the case of poor Martha is over, to go and see Mrs.

Blowers, and find from her what the young man is doing at Flinders. If it's true that he's continually sitting in the damp grass under an umbrella, instead of resting, as Dr. Eustace ordered, I shan't be happy till I've warned him of the consequences.'

Hester could not but approve of Mrs. Beaver's solicitude for Dr. Eustace's patient, and the worthy woman, thus encouraged, lost no time in visiting Mrs. Blowers, whom she found so highly excited that it seemed vain to interrogate her about the consumptive artist; she could talk about nobody except Major Twister, and Mrs. Beaver had to defer the object of her visit.

'He'll be the ruin of Flinders, that he will!' exclaimed Mrs. Blowers; 'he's frightened Mrs. Sparragus away, and he's got such an appetite, we're out of pocket by him, and now he's going to fight a duel!'

'A duel! Not with the poor consumptive artist, I hope,' interposed Mrs. Beaver, in dismay.

'No, no, worse than that, ever so much. He's going to fight the doctor! And he's cer-

tain to kill him, for poor dear Dimbledon never fired a pistol in his life !'

'But what has the doctor done ? Has he over-physicked him ?'

'Over-physicked him ! nonsense, Mrs. Beaver ; the major loves physic to such a degree he hoards it up as a miser does gold, and gloats over it !'

'Then what's it all about ?'

'Well, it's all about Mrs. Sparragus.'

'Mrs. Sparragus ! Poor, harmless woman, whatever can she have to do with the major ?' demanded Mrs. Beaver, amazed.

'Nothing in the world, dear old soul ! It's that urchin, Paul, who is at the bottom of it.'

Mrs. Beaver was more perplexed than ever, and Mrs. Blowers, with a view to narrate all the circumstances, invited Mrs. Beaver to partake of tea, and led the way to her private apartment.

It was too true : the boy in buttons was at the bottom of it.

The major was sipping his old crusted and cracking walnuts, when, in glancing through the window, he saw Dr. Dimbledon confiden-

tially talking to Paul. This unusual circumstance was still more unaccountable when the major detected, or thought he detected, certain significant gestures in his direction on the part of the doctor, and responsive action on the part of the boy in buttons. In a moment the major felt his martial ire rise. He was evidently the butt of the doctor's sarcasm, and a jest to the boy in buttons. He, the hero of a dozen fields on Brighton Downs, the victor in a hundred skirmishes at Wormwood Scrubs, he, a butt and a jest! No, by Mars, no! He will smite the faithless compounder of lotions hip and thigh! But how best to proceed? His military training taught him to make no rash movement—to conceal his tactics—to dissemble. He would parley with the enemy. With this intent, he rang for the boy in buttons to clear away the dessert; and by way of starting a conversation, evinced great interest in Paul, and inquired after his parents, when Paul informed him that his father was ostler to Dr. Dimbledon.

That statement seemed to mollify the bellicose major, for it seemed probable that, after

all, the boy's family concerns were the subject of the conversation.

But this, whether a fact or not, did not appear to Paul sufficiently exciting to elicit half-crowns, so he at once denied the soft impeachment—it was not about his father, but about somebody else; and the boy fabricated a snigger which the major was at liberty to interpret according to his taste. The major was swift to draw the most unsatisfactory conclusions, and his mercurial wrath again shot up the thermometer.

‘Was it about me you were talking?’

‘No, sir,’ replied Paul, with the utmost readiness.

The answer relieved the major's mind,—old Dimbledon was not such a humbug after all! and, having little curiosity beyond, he intimated to the boy in buttons that he might take his departure. But this was altogether at variance with Paul's views,—he had not earned the usual half-crown. Though young in years, and diminutive in size, the boy in buttons had the wit and readiness of more heroic proportions, and, although he had not yet realised the

depth, breadth, and height of the amatory sentiment when it stirs in the human breast, he knew that, whatever it was, it paid handsomely if you fan it properly; and, with that object, he resolved to infuse a dash of jealousy into the major's flagging interest.

‘Doctor’s in love,’ he said, audaciously winking.

‘What!’ ejaculated Major Twister, uncertain that he heard aright, and altogether oblivious of the boy’s recent little peccadillo.

‘Doctor Dimbledon’s in love.’

The major burst into immoderate laughter.

‘In love! dear old D.? With whom?’

‘I mustn’t tell; it’s a secret.’

‘Oh, that means five shillings, I suppose?’ said Major Twister, slipping some coins into Paul’s hand. ‘Now, out with it.’

‘I think, sir, I’d better not,’ ventured the boy, his courage failing him at the last moment.

‘Then hand me back that crown, you young mongrel,’ retorted the major, fiercely,

But the boy in buttons had no idea of relinquishing money once in his pocket, so his scruples vanished.

‘He’s in love with—with the widow.’

‘What widow?’

‘Mrs. Sparragus.’

The major bounded from his chair and gave such copious utterance to the language attributed to the British army in Flanders that the boy in buttons repented his imprudence in infusing the dash of jealousy, and endeavoured to palliate the mischief he had conjured up.

‘Please, sir, I didn’t mean any harm.’

‘Of course not, my boy. I’m immensely indebted to you for telling me the truth. Somebody will have to suffer for it, but it won’t be you, Paul.’

‘Oh, sir, please forgive me!’

‘Forgive you! Why, you shall have a sovereign for this when I next draw my pay! And, as I said before, you shall be my butler as soon as I marry the widow. But, as true as I’m a Twister, I’ll let daylight into the carcase of that treacherous compounder of vile decoctions at three-and-sixpence a bottle!’

‘Oh, sir, if youll forgive me this once, I’ll never—never——’

‘My dear Paul, you’ve done me an immense

service, and you shall have double the wages you get here. If anyone has to forgive you, it's that base old Dimbledon, who will have to pay for his treachery before he's many days older.'

'But, sir, it was all my——'

'Yes, your honesty. You're too conscientious, my boy, to keep me in ignorance of this rascally plot of old Dimbledon, though, to save his worthless skin, I can quite understand you'd withdraw all you have told me, if you could. But it's too late, and I'll be shot if I don't drill a hole or two in the old pachyderm——'

'Oh, sir,' cried the peccant Paul, ready to refund his unhallowed gains and make a clean breast of his tricks; but the irascible major gave him no time, for he hurried Paul out of the room and sat down to his desk to indite a cartel which ran thus, and was delivered to Dr. Dimbledon by the next post:—

'You not only try to poison me with your beastly decoctions, but, availing yourself of my unsuspecting confidences, you endeavour to kill me twice over by fixing your frivolous affections upon the woman I mean to marry! I am

a man of few words, but, by Hercules, you shall learn that a Twister of the Twisters goes straight to the point. Mrs. Sparragus can't marry both of us—at least, not at once, so one or other must be removed, and there is only one way known to a Twister to do that effectually. I am the injured and insulted party, but I waive my right as to choice of weapons; I leave it to you to decide. Say whether you prefer to be run through with the rapier or riddled with the revolver. All I insist on is, that blood be spilt within twenty-four hours, and I await the visit of your seconds. Yours, &c.,

‘CORNELIUS TWISTER.’

‘Poor dear fellow!’ exclaimed Dr. Dimbledon, calmly folding up the letter after careful perusal; ‘I always had a fear that his hallucinations would sooner or later develop into mania, but I hardly expected it yet; and, though he’s as harmless as a duckling, I think it better to put him away. Dear old Twister! but I ascribe it to his inordinate devotion to port-wine and nuts and his perversity in rejecting my counteractive treatment.’

And Dr. Dimbledon, knowing the necessity of promptitude in such cases, sent two medical practitioners to examine and certify. These gentlemen, being introduced to the major as Dr. Dimbledon's seconds, had no difficulty in obtaining an interview, and, as the gallant major, snatching off his peruke and flourishing it over his head, fulminated anathemas in the direction of that recreant concoctor of powders and potions, again employing the emphatic language ascribed to the British Army in Flanders, the two experts had no hesitation in certifying, and, within twenty-four hours, the heroic Twister was securely locked up in the County Lunatic Asylum, the myrmidons of that beneficent institution being ably assisted by the muscular Dick Blowers in attiring the astonished and recalcitrant major in a strait-waistcoat.

As soon as Mrs. Beaver could revert to the object of her visit, Mrs. Blowers, having exhausted her stored-up indignation regarding the demented major and the peccant boy in buttons, enlightened her on the subject of the artist.

‘And he’s another madman, my dear,’ she

cried, raising her hands by way of conveying some idea of the hopelessness of the case; 'mad as a hatter!'

'Mad!' naturally echoed Mrs. Beaver, in amazement and horror.

'Well, I call anyone mad who goes about the damp fields and lanes without his goloshes,' explained Mrs. Blowers; 'and delicate as he is in the chest, too.'

Mrs. Beaver, on reflection, thought the epithet not a bit too severe.

'If it isn't madness, it's folly, which is much the same thing. But where does he go to?'

'Oh, he's painting the dead oak out there by the warren, and he's got a young fellow with him who is painting too.'

'I think I'll walk round that way,' ventured Mrs. Beaver.

'Then pray take his goloshes and entreat him to wear them.'

'Certainly; it will afford me great pleasure if I can prevail upon him to do so. In fact, it's my duty to caution him.'

Mrs. Beaver, armed with the goloshes and

vested with delegated authority, returned to the cottage where Hester awaited her, and the two at once sallied forth in the direction of the blasted oak, Mrs. Beaver resolute and voluble; Hester timid and silent.

‘I’ve no patience with people who are weak in the lungs playing such pranks. I’ll speak pretty plainly to him, that I will.’

‘Be gentle with him Mrs. Beaver,’ pleaded Hester; ‘it is only indiscretion.’

‘Indiscretion! Miss Tierney; and is not indiscretion the cause of more than half the troubles of this life?’

Hester could not gainsay the nurse’s argument. She only suggested that she herself had better remain apart during the contemplated castigation.

‘Certainly not, my dear Miss Tierney. Nurses must support one another. We are professional, you know, and he’ll have to obey our orders; but we shall have to hold together and be firm.’

Hester felt anything but firm; her knees shook as they advanced towards the reckless offender against hygiene, who was apparently quite

unconscious of the near approach of the sanitary censors.

Mrs. Beaver marched bravely through bracken and tangle, followed timorously at a distance by her coadjutor, till she reached the spot where two artists quietly pursued their studies. One was a robust youth, the other a pale, spare young man, —the latter evidently the owner of the goloshes; it was upon his head the indignant remonstrance of outraged medical science should fall. But, singularly enough, all Mrs. Beaver's rigour faded away as she contemplated her victim. His serenity, his handsome, colourless face, his dignity of bearing arrested the censure on her lips, and when, conscious of her presence, he rose from his camp-stool and saluted her, the censure was dissipated into thin air.

‘Oh, how lovely!’ she exclaimed, oblivious of the object of her descent upon Aspen; ‘wonderful! Why, I never saw anything so life-like! Struck by lightning, I suppose, sir?’

‘Yes, madam, ten years ago.’

‘May my friend have a peep?’ inquired Mrs. Beaver, beckoning Hester.

‘Most certainly,’ replied Aspen, making way

for Hester without actually observing his second visitor, who gazed enraptured upon the vigorous representation of the blasted and bleached oak.

‘Weird and ghostly,’ whispered Hester to Mrs. Beaver.

‘My friend says it is weird and ghostly, sir,’ remarked Mrs. Beaver, turning to the two artists who stood aside together.

‘That is precisely its character—and its fault.’

‘No, no, it is its merit,’ remonstrated Hester; but the words did not reach Aspen.

‘And my companion, who is an infallible critic as well as a clever painter, says I ought to balance the dead tree by a bit of life and colour—a figure, in fact; but I am not so fortunate as to know anyone whom I could ask to sit there.’

Mrs. Beaver glanced at Hester, whose dainty figure and rich auburn hair seemed to mark her for pictorial treatment, while the bright shawl she had hurriedly thrown over her shoulders offered the precise thing the artist required.

‘Oh, if we could be of any use to you, sir, in

your beautiful picture, I'm sure we should be only too happy,' she ventured, adopting the plural without authority from Hester, whose eyes were still fascinated by the painting.

'I feel deeply sensible of your goodness,' replied Aspen, cordially; 'but I have no right to accept such a service.'

'But the ladies offer it of their free will,' interposed Jem, who saw how valuable such an addition would be in the present stage of the picture, and had no such scruples as Graham, and no idea of allowing him to throw away the chance.

'Yes,' added Mrs. Beaver, 'we wish to be of service, sir.'

Graham could not disregard Jem's importunate gestures in addition to Mrs. Beaver's reiterated offer.

'If you really can spare the time and can endure the tedious function for ten or twenty minutes, I certainly should be glad to sketch you, sitting on that stone near the tree.'

'We shall be delighted—at least, my friend will. I myself must go back to Jackson's cottage. We have been nursing his poor little girl,

Martha, who died this morning, and there are several things I have to see to. But my friend can stay as long as you require her. She has nothing to do till we are called to another case.'

And, so saying, Mrs. Beaver, altogether oblivious of the goloshes, which were still in her hand, waved an adieu to Hester, who was too stupefied by her precipitate desertion of her to find words to express her disapproval, and returned to Jackson's cottage.

Graham now for the first time turned his attention to his second visitor, who stood embarrassed, watching the vanishing form of Mrs. Beaver, whom she seemed desirous of following.

'If it would be in the least degree irksome or inconvenient to you to remain, I beg you will not hesitate a moment to join your friend,' said Graham, in gentle and encouraging accents which at once reassured Hester.

'I would rather remain, sir,' she replied, bashfully, at the same time moving in the direction of the tree. 'Shall I sit on the stone?'

'If you please.'

'Do you wish me to place myself in any particular attitude, sir?'

‘No; take your seat in your own natural way.’

Graham watched the girl as she walked easily and modestly to the spot indicated and took a position of perfect grace, her eyes cast down and her shawl thrown loosely across her knees. It was strange, and to Graham wholly unaccountable, but the cadence of her voice in the few words which had escaped her affected him in a manner which, though pleasurable, was not altogether unpainful, but the pain felt like the excess of pleasure.

Hardly aware that he was surrendering to an influence which dominated him with a soothing witchery, Graham, though standing before his easel in the semblance of an artist at work, was as motionless as the tree on his canvas. He gazed on the seated figure before him,—an obliging nurse, amiable enough to pose for his convenience—but his gaze was vacant,—he saw beyond. And, as the invaluable minutes passed without profit, Jem grew impatient, anxious, alarmed.

‘Mr. Aspen,’ he said, touching the young

man's arm, 'she is placed where you wished, why do you not sketch her in?'

Graham started; the pressure of Jem's hand broke the spell of silence.

'I had forgotten what I was about. You are right, Jem. The young woman will come admirably into the picture;' and, without more loss of time, he outlined the simple and graceful figure exactly as it appeared. The operation was hardly complete when Mrs. Beaver reappeared, surprising everybody and rendering further study impossible.

'Dear me, dear me!' she exclaimed, out of breath, 'to think I should have forgotten the goloshes! I was so full of that tree that they went right out of my head. I want you to put them on, sir, please. It is so dangerous for anyone in—in your condition to stand in the damp grass. I've known so many bad cases, all in consequence of wet shoes.'

Graham smiled. It was an injudicious allusion, but he took it good-humouredly.

'Perhaps, in those other cases to which you refer, dry shoes would have made all the differ-

ence, but, in my case, it can be of no consequence. You see, I have sketched in your friend, and I feel immensely grateful for her kindness in sitting ;' and Graham desired Jem to inform the young woman that the sketch was made.

'But you havn't painted the colours yet,' urged Mrs. Beaver, examining the work.

'No ; I have only drawn the outline.'

'Then you will require us again ?'

'I can hardly presume to ask such a favour a second time,' replied Graham, with great deference. 'I think I can fill in the colour now that I have the form.'

'Oh, but is that the right way?' demanded Mrs. Beaver, in evident doubt.

'No, ma'am, it is not the right way,' answered Jem, observing his master's hesitancy. 'It's not the way Mr. Aspen teaches me to paint.'

Mrs. Beaver at once perceived that the artist's speech was prompted by modesty and consideration for his sitter. So she undertook to settle the point :

'Will you be painting here to-morrow ?'

'Every day.'

‘At the same hour?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then we shall be here too—unless we are ordered off to a new case. And we hope you will allow us to be of use to you, for we really like sitting.’

Mrs. Beaver again indulged in the plural number without consulting Hester. Possibly she remembered that, at Hester’s age—age of romance and tender sentiment—it would have charmed her young, fresh heart to have been gazed at by the hour by such eyes as Aspen’s. And her conjecture did not seem altogether wrong, for Hester, who heard the offer thus handsomely made, showed no sign of demurrer, but, on the contrary, seemed by the play of her mouth and pose of her head to assent.

‘But really——’

‘We shall be here. Any way, if I can’t manage to come, my friend will. So that’s settled.’

It was useless for Graham to affect objections,—they stuck in his throat; and, before he could succeed in formulating a polite protest against such self-sacrifice on the part of the

younger nurse, the two companions were beyond hearing, unless he shouted, which he was hardly disposed to do.

Satisfaction, differing in origin and degree, was felt by each. Jem was jubilant,—the figure would be put in accurately. Graham drew a breath,—it could not but be a pleasure—nay, a joy—to look upon so fair, so calm and so sweet a face. Hester's heart beat at the thought that Fate had again thrown her in the path of the man whose head, unknown to him, once lay upon her bosom. And Mrs. Beaver had done her duty in warning the artist of the danger he exposed himself to in going about damp fields without goloshes.

CHAPTER IV.

A VISION OF THE NIGHT.

MRS. SPARRAGUS had retired to rest ; Susan had performed the last duties of the day by bolting the doors, extinguishing the lights, and 'tidying up' generally, and finally seeking her chamber. All was quiet and conducive to slumber. But Mrs. Sparragus lay unrestful, and counted the strokes of the hall-clock as it recorded midnight and the small hours that succeeded. She was in that state of sleepy wakefulness which is neither one thing nor the other, and yet partakes of both conditions. In this indefinite somnolency the brain, which in actual sleep invests its own creations with the semblance of reality, is apt to contemplate

facts as figments,—the mere embodiments of a busy fancy. Mrs. Sparragus was thus dreamily watching the flickering of the night-light on the hob, when she thought she saw the door gently opened. She naturally supposed Susan had occasion to speak to her, when a man noiselessly entered. He seemed to hesitate, uncertain of the situation, and cast a hurried glance around. In the French phrase, for which we have no equivalent, *il s'orientait*. Yes, there was the bed; there the chest of drawers; there the wardrobe. Once he seemed to start as he glanced at the portraits of Flinders and Sparragus, whose eyes were fixed upon the daring invader of the sanctuary. He approached the bed, and Mrs. Sparragus, spell-bound, made no movement; no word escaped her. The intruder gazed intently into her face, and in the dim light of the taper she must have appeared asleep, and he evidently concluded that she was so. Nevertheless, it seemed in the dim light that the man, to make assurance sure, took from his pocket a handkerchief and a vial. Was it his intention to sprinkle the contents of the latter upon the for-

mer, and hold it to the nostrils of the sleeper, thus producing partial insensibility? Apparently. It dulled the power to move or speak, but it left the faculty of observation undiminished.

Stealthily the figure moved to a certain drawer in the wardrobe, which he or it opened, raised the French plum-box, and from beneath it took a long envelope, on which was inscribed, 'My Will. Also a list of securities in charge of my friend, Stephen Honeydew; also his receipt for the same.' The burglar or wraith opened the document to satisfy himself that what he sought was really there, replaced the Will in the envelope, and slid the other papers into his breast-pocket, closing the drawer. He then returned to the bedside and again keenly scrutinised the face of the helpless sleeper. In terror Mrs. Sparragus had closed her eyes, and she appeared to be in a deep sleep. The man, real or imaginary, seemed to debate: shall he administer another inhalation? shall he make detection or even suspicion impossible? A few minutes more of the handkerchief, and all would be safe! The

victim was stout, short-necked, advanced in life. 'Apoplexy' would be the easy medical declaration. Yes, it shall be done! Mrs. Sparragus, still powerless with the dire incubus, could see it in the glare of his eyes and in his clenched teeth as his hand drew forth the handkerchief which should prolong her sleep for ever, when a sharp sound in an adjoining room seemed to strike him with alarm. The sound was unquestionably real, however doubtful the vision. It was Susan turning in her little bed, which creaked in its joints under the movement. But the innocent noise served to arrest the threatening hand, filling the intruder with alarm, for he hastily and noiselessly retreated as he had entered, and left Mrs. Sparragus still watching the flickering light on the hob.

Scarcely had the figure, living or fantastic, vanished, when Mrs. Sparragus, throwing off the terrible nightmare, cried sufficiently loud to rouse Susan, who flew to her mistress in great alarm.

'Oh, Susan!' she exclaimed, her face blanched with terror, 'there's been a man in here!'

‘Nonsense, mem,’ replied Susan, casting a glance round the room and looking under the bed, ‘you’ve been a-dreaming.’

‘I tell you I saw a man come in, and he stood exactly where you stand now.’

‘Oh, mem, it’s that welsh rabbit.’

‘What do you say?’

‘It’s all along of that welsh rabbit. I don’t think you ought to eat such things at night.’

‘Susan, I never was more certain of anything in my life.’

‘Yes, mem, I know. It’s always like that. I’m certain to have it after cucumber. All I can say is that, if a man did come in here, he must have come down the chimbley, for the doors is all bolted and barred.’

‘Are you certain all the doors are fastened?’ demanded Mrs. Sparragus, losing faith in her senses.

‘Certain, mem; but, to quite satisfy you and meself that you’ve had the nightmare, I’ll go and see;’ and Susan, taking a candle, descended to the hall and basement examining the fastenings, which were intact. Returning and assur-

ing her mistress of the fact, Mrs. Sparragus began to accept Susan's hypothesis of the phenomenon.

‘ You see, mem, here’s your watch and the ring with Mr. Sparragus’s hair in it, and the brooch with Mr. Flinders’s hair, and your purse all just where you left them on the drawers. Is it likely burglars would come into a room and see all them lovely things and not touch them? It’s redik’lus, mem.’

Mrs. Sparragus was convinced : it was absurd. She had had a horrible dream, and that was all. And Susan, rough but tender-hearted, proposed to remain in the room the remainder of the night, and insisted upon occupying the couch at the foot of her mistress’s bed. Thus comforted and protected, Mrs. Sparragus forgot her trouble and slept soundly till the morning, her slumbers not being disturbed even by Susan’s resonant snoring.

Lena chanced to call in the course of the morning to report progress with the painting, and Mrs. Sparragus, still much disturbed in mind by the dream, related it to her visitor in all its details.

‘Do you know, my dear, it was that real I seemed to feel the man’s breath as he stood over me! They say dreams only last a moment, but I could hear my watch ticking ever so long, and then he put a handkerchief to my face and I seemed to forget where I was for a little while, and then I heard the watch tick again and there he was by the wardrobe, and to think all that should only occupy a moment!’

‘What did he appear to be doing?’ asked Lena, interested and a little anxious. ‘Did he seem to be a thief?’

‘Oh, no, my dear, he didn’t touch a thing. There lay my watch and my purse, and there he left them.’

‘And you had never seen the man before?’

‘Well, now, it is singular you should ask that question, for, do you know, the man looked just like Mr. Honeydew,—but I wouldn’t for the world let him know I ever had such an idea, even in a dream! But it will be a lesson, dear Lena, and nothing will induce me ever again to eat welsh rabbit at night, fond as I am of it.’

When Lena reached Regent’s Park she found

Mr. Clive, who had returned from the city before his usual hour, and she naturally related Mrs. Sparragus's remarkable dream and her great mental disturbance. Mr. Clive listened to the narrative with keen attention, and even required a repetition of it.

‘You seem particularly interested, papa, in the dear old lady’s nightmare,’ said Ethel, laughing at the gravity evinced by Mr. Clive.

‘Yes, child, it certainly does interest me a good deal ; it’s rather remarkable.’

‘But so are most dreams—especially after welsh rabbits!’ retorted Ethel, with an air of contemptuousness.

‘Granted ; but when two persons’ dreams fit one into the other exactly, it is, to say the least, unusual.’

‘What can you mean, papa ?’

‘Just this. If Mrs. Sparragus’s matter was all a dream, my friend Lapwing had a dream also, and the circumstances of the two dreams adjust themselves to one another with the precision of cause and effect.’

Lena and Ethel betrayed the utmost perplexity and scepticism.

‘So that you may understand my meaning, I will tell you a little story. I had occasion to appoint a young man in our employ to a particular duty, and, to enable him to be quiet and undisturbed, I engaged rooms for him at 50, Crutched Friars, a situation admirably suited for the business he undertook. The rooms on the same landing, facing his, were occupied by a commercial agent, and the name on the door was, “Mr. Stephen Honeydew.”’

‘Honeydew!’ ejaculated Lena. ‘That’s the name of the gentleman living at No. 3, Tapioca Terrace.’

‘Then, I suppose, it must be the same person,’ replied Mr. Clive, indifferently. ‘Anyhow, Lapwing and Honeydew constantly meeting on the stairs, a quasi-acquaintance sprang up between them, and, as Lapwing is rather “green,” or what they call “soft in the upper story,” Honeydew took advantage of his good, easy nature, and made use of his services, sending him on all sorts of errands, as if he had been his own clerk.’

‘That was really too bad,’ interposed Ethel

with indignation ; ‘for, of course, he had to neglect your business.’

‘Lapwing is one of those people who don’t consider that for a moment. I saw him just now, and, on my inquiring how he was getting on, he mentioned Honeydew, and said that, instead of going to business at eleven o’clock as usual, he arrived there this morning at nine, in a great state of excitement, and, on Lapwing asking “What’s up?” Honeydew explained that he had just received telegrams informing him of his aged father’s sudden death at Glasgow, and that he must start off by the ten o’clock train for the north, to arrange affairs, and consign his honoured remains to the family vault in the necropolis.’

‘Poor man. How distressing!’ said Ethel.

‘Wasn’t it? Lapwing offered all possible condolences. Could he do anything to expedite matters? he asked. Yes, Mr. Honeydew would be grateful if he would go to Cook’s office, and buy a ticket, to save time. This Lapwing, with characteristic good-nature, did, and when he got back to Crutched Friars there was a strong smell of burnt paper, which Honeydew explained

was the accidental ignition of a newspaper while he was lighting his pipe. Would he kindly call a cab? Lapwing amiably fetched a cab. Would he crown all his noble service by trotting to Euston with him, helping him with his luggage, and seeing him off? Certainly. Lapwing was such a fool, he didn't see when his good-nature was being abused.'

'I think Lapwing was to blame to forget his own duties to that extent,' put in Ethel; 'don't you, Lena?'

'Perhaps he had finished his task,' suggested Lena, in defence of Lapwing.

'By no means; he hadn't got half through it. However, he jumped into the cab, and they were just in time to catch the "Flying Scotchman" for the north. Honeydew took his seat, and had only time to say "Ta-ta!" to Lapwing, when the train moved off.'

'And Lapwing returned to his office?' surmised Lena, hoping that he did not get into trouble.

'Well, no, he didn't. Lapwing is as eccentric as he is soft in the upper story. He thought he should like a ride in the train, as he had enjoyed the drive in the cab so much. So, what should

he do, but, exchanging a few words with the guard, he jumped into the van at the tail of the train.'

'And went all the way to Glasgow?' inquired Lena, despairing of being able to say another word in extenuation of Lapwing's lapses.

'There has hardly been time for his return from Scotland, as all this happened only this morning, and I have just seen Lapwing,' explained Mr. Clive. 'He did not go beyond Willesden.'

'Why?'

'Because he observed that Mr. Honeydew got out there, and, making all possible haste, caught a train on the opposite platform, bound for Euston.'

'For Euston!'

'Yes, the station from which he had just started.'

'Then the poor man had forgotten something! I think it was very unkind of Lapwing not to offer to see after it so as to enable him to go and bury his father,' said Ethel.

'Well, I told you Lapwing was the reverse of brilliant, so you mustn't blame him.'

'He allowed poor Honeydew to return all

alone?' enquired Ethel, much interested in Honeydew.

'By no means. He did as before, and got into the guard's van and returned to Euston too.'

'How stupid!'

'Wasn't it? However, that's Lapwing's queer way. At Euston, Honeydew jumped into a cab, and that wag Lapwing jumped into another cab, and told the driver to follow the first, just for the fun of the thing.'

'It doesn't appear to me particularly funny,' interposed Ethel, impatiently.

'I quite admit that; it wasn't a bit funny, but Lapwing's ideas are peculiar. The cab engaged by Honeydew drove to Waterloo Station, and there he took a ticket for Southampton by the train timed to catch the boat for Havre.'

'And Lapwing was sufficiently funny to take a ticket for the same destination?' demanded Ethel, satirically, more and more impressed by the imbecility of the young man in her father's employment.

'No; Lapwing seems to have had enough fun. But he kept up the joke by passing it on

to a friend, named Mac, whom he met on the platform, and his friend must have been about as soft in his upper story as himself, for he quite entered into it, and actually took a ticket for Southampton, and, as it happened, was shown into the same compartment as Honeydew.'

'And, pray, what next, papa?'

'Lapwing's friend and Honeydew will probably travel to Havre by the same boat, and thence, I daresay, to New York, for a steamer is advertised to sail from that port to-morrow.'

'But it appears to me about the most absurd thing imaginable to go and do what Lapwing did for no reason whatever?' said Miss Clive, contemptuously.

'You will have a different opinion of Lapwing, when I tell you that he is one of the most intelligent and cleverest detectives in London.'

'Papa!'

'Yes, my dear, and if Mac, who is another skilful member of the same force, does his duty equally well, it is possible Mrs. Sparragus may not be reduced to beggary; but I feel dubious about it.'

Ethel and Lena gazed at Mr. Clive in dumb amazement and dismay.

‘Oh, pray explain, papa!’ cried Ethel, in unaffected pain; ‘we cannot in the least understand what it all means. You said Lapwing dreamt all this!’

‘I said that, if Mrs. Sparragus’s affair was, as supposed, a dream, Lapwing’s was also a dream, and that the two dreams fitted into one another like cause and effect. However, Lapwing’s was not in the least a dream, and Mrs. Sparragus’s was equally real, and there is a direct connection between the two.’

‘But, if Lapwing knew Honeydew had robbed the poor lady, why did he not arrest him?’

‘Because he had no power to do so. Honeydew may be as innocent as Mrs. Sparragus herself, and I may have been doing him a cruel injustice, and Lapwing, with all his ’cuteness, may have been making a lot of incredible blunders. We must wait and see; and the first thing for me to do is to pay a visit to Tapioca Terrace.’

The brougham was waiting at the door, and Mr. Clive at once proceeded to give effect to his

intentions, leaving Ethel and Lena dazed with the alarming news.

When Mr. Clive reached Tapioca Terrace, the sombre expression on his face was, in Susan's view, a very unsatisfactory sign. It was evident that matters did not proceed as she could wish. Her first impulse on announcing the arrival of the widow's adorer was to espouse his cause, and implore her not to dash his spirits and throw cold water on his affections; but, recollecting that Mrs. Sparragus had suffered terrible things in a dream, he had, no doubt, come to comfort her, and so Susan forbore, hoping that everything would come right in the end. She therefore led the way to the drawing-room, and then proceeded to assist her mistress to adjust her best cap and give the touch of grace to her attire generally.

Left to his own cogitations and devices for a few minutes, Mr. Clive theorised. As he drove up to Tapioca Terrace his quick eye had discerned the balcony common to the three houses, and, as soon as he found himself alone, he scrutinised the stage more nearly. What was there to impede direct communication? a low rail,

which a child might step over. And the window—ah! it was unbolted. How grossly careless of Susan! But was it Susan's negligence? How easily might a casual visitor push back the bolt and forget to replace it. And Mr. Clive's theory seemed to gain confirmation, for he drew a deep breath and sighed 'Poor lady!' and continued to theorise.

'Dear madam,' he said, saluting Mrs. Sparragus, in his usual courteous and kindly manner, 'I will not offer an apology for disturbing you, for the reason that my visit is in connection with an anxiety I feel regarding the news Lena brought us this morning.'

'Ah, she has told you all about my strange and painful dream.'

'I shall rejoice if we can satisfy ourselves that it was only a dream.'

Mrs. Sparragus was too perplexed by her visitor's doubt on the subject to reply.

'It is my habit, madam, to investigate very thoroughly any matter I take in hand. Perhaps, therefore, you will not deem me impertinent if I ask you a few questions with that view.'

'Oh, Mr. Clive, I can have no objection to

answer any questions you wish to put;' and Mrs. Sparragus trembled,—she again felt like a criminal in the dock before the magistrate.

‘Have you had any visitors in this room lately?’

‘No; only Mr. Honeydew, who was shown in here two or three days ago.’

‘Would you mind sending your servant to inquire whether that gentleman is at home?’

‘Certainly;’ and Mrs. Sparragus gave orders to Susan accordingly.

‘Your bed-room is on this floor?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Have you ever had chloroform administered to you?’

‘Never.’

‘Then you have no knowledge of its odour or the sensations it produces?’

‘I have not.’

‘The man you saw in your dream touched neither your purse nor your watch, Lena tells me?’

‘Neither; and that satisfies me it was no real thief,’ replied Mrs. Sparragus, decisively; for she had her theory as well as Mr. Clive his, and she considered that point conclusive.

‘Certainly that is a strong argument in favour of a hallucination. Where did the spectre appear to stand?’

‘In front of my wardrobe.’

‘Is there a drawer in it?’

‘There is.’

‘Do you keep valuables in it?’

‘Oh, dear, no, only some papers.’

‘Newspapers?’

Mrs. Sparragus laughed at the idle question.

‘Lor’ no ; my Will and receipts Mr. Honeydew gave me from time to time in exchange for my deeds, securities and such-like.’

‘He was good enough to take charge of your deeds and such-like?’

‘Yes, because he has an iron safe at his office in Crutched Friars, and I needn’t tell you they were always in danger here.’

Precisely.’

Susan returned and reported that the servant at No. 3 stated in reply to her enquiry that Mr. Honeydew had left London early in the morning for Glasgow, his father having died suddenly.

‘Precisely,’ repeated Mr. Clive. It was evi-

dent his theory was receiving confirmation. 'I dare say, as it was all a dream, you have not had the curiosity to examine your drawer to see whether the Will and other papers remain undisturbed?'

'No, I have not.'

'Would you mind, just to remove my last scruple, going to inspect those documents?'

Mrs. Sparragus at once proceeded to her chamber, glad to find it in her power to confute a lot of groundless and gratuitous doubts. She presently returned, however, much less satisfied but still unsuspecting.

'My Will is there in its usual place.'

'I'm pleased to hear that,' replied Mr. Clive, cordially; adding, 'and all the other documents too?'

'Well, no: I must have mislaid them.'

'But they were with the Will?'

'Yes; I don't remember moving them.'

The truth of Mr. Clive's theory was being demonstrated more and more axiomatically.

'Pardon my apparent inquisitiveness in asking another question,' urged Mr. Clive, with deference. 'Have you a banker?'

‘No; only Mr. Honeydew.’

‘He is, in fact, your man of business?’

‘Yes; since my fright in the city he has managed everything for me. He is what you call my attorney.’

‘Receives your dividends; sells out of the funds when you require money, and all that sort of thing?’

‘Yes; and, when I decided to let Flinders, he managed it all for me.’

‘Who is your tenant there?’

‘I don’t recollect the name,—I think Mr. Honeydew said he had let it to a syndicate or something.’

‘You signed documents of some kind, I presume?’

‘Oh, yes, several.’

‘Deeds?’

‘Yes, deeds.’

‘In the presence of witnesses, no doubt?’

‘Yes, he always brought two of his clerks to see me sign.’

‘And you never read the papers you put your name to?’

‘Never; for what would have been the use?’

I don't understand these things ; besides, I knew that everything my friend did was right.'

'I conclude that Mr. Honeydew took away with him all the papers you had signed?'

'Yes, to lock up in his iron chest for security.'

Mr. Clive with difficulty suppressed a groan as he rose, saying to himself,

'There is not a moment to lose, if, in fact, it is not already too late!' then addressing Mrs. Sparragus, 'I hope, madam, the many questions I have felt it my duty as a friend to put to you have not appeared to you idle and impertinent?'

'Oh, no, Mr. Clive. I'm sure it's very good and kind of you to take such an interest in an old woman's dream.'

And the worthy alderman bade the widow adieu, and drove at once to the city.

Lapwing was transformed from the vacant, gaping loon, as presented to Mr. Honeydew's observation, into the smart, wary, resolute officer of the law that he actually was ; and, on Mr. Clive reaching his place of business, Lapwing was there awaiting him. He reported that he had entered Honeydew's office with a skeleton

key, and found the room in the utmost disorder. There was very little furniture, and neither books nor documents of any kind were to be seen. There was not even a bit of damnatory blotting-paper. The only paper intact was a London and North-western time-table, which was lying open turned down at the ten a.m. down train for the north, evidently intended to mislead.

The rest of the day was employed in making investigations at the Bank of England, at his private banker's, and at brokers' offices whither Lapwing had on several occasions obligingly gone to cash cheques and carry letters. Mr. Clive's theories gained disastrous confirmation. Securities belonging to Mrs. Sparragus had been realised, and her money in the Funds sold out and everything turned into Bank of England notes. The wretch had beggared his too-confiding friend! Unfortunately, an interval must elapse before a warrant could be issued for his apprehension, and, though he had booked for Southampton as he had booked for Glasgow, it was only a surmise that his design was to catch the New York steamer at Havre, for that too

may have been a ruse. Happily, however, Mac was following him like his shadow, and a telegram to the authorities in New York would meet the case, supposing that port to be his destination.

Manifestly there was weighty work to be done, but Mr. Clive was by no means despairing of success,—he had the brains, the money, and the enterprise of the City of London at his command, and the long arm of the law was already in requisition. These were potent factors to have set in motion, and he must await the result, with all the patience at his command; but he looked forward with anxiety to the receipt of the next despatch from Mac.

CHAPTER V.

LIGHT AND SHADE.

FEW epidemics spread with such rapidity, gaining accretion as they travel, as the news of one's neighbour's misfortunes. And the infection, however distressing, is not altogether destitute of mitigation, for an opportunity is afforded of contemplating with serene composure one's own happy immunity from a like visitation. Everybody who retails the story points his moral and awards the censure with unstinting liberality, the moral and the censure being always at the expense of the sufferer. Clapham knew it in its full dimensions, and a good deal beyond, long before Mrs. Sparragus had an idea of any worse trouble than a wild dream of the night.

Clapham discussed the affair before the person concerned had quite realised it. Clapham tottled up the amount and discounted the consequences before the victim knew she was a shilling the worse for it. Clapham saw, in its mind's eye, the well-to-do widow of Tapioca Terrace in a blue check gown and a black straw bonnet—the lively livery of the Clapham Workhouse ; and Clapham pronounced its unanimous verdict, that Mrs. Sparragus got no more than she deserved, as she had been so egregiously stupid as to put herself in the hands of a rogue.

But surely, while the Clapham gossips had their say and flung their stone, the loving friend, the counsellor, the spiritual censor at No. 1 flew to her side, cheered her with her sympathy and eased her heart and soul of the burden ? Oh, dear, no. Mrs. Lipperty knew better than to waste breath in further exhortations. The news, gathered from the greengrocer, confirmed by the buttermilk man and supplemented by everybody she visited in the suburb, filled her with disgust and indignation,—but the indignation and disgust, in obedience to invariable custom, were directed against Mrs. Sparragus.

‘Stupid old thing! what’s the use of my troubling myself any more about her? So nicely as I had arranged her affairs, even down to making her Will, and then for her to allow that man at No. 3, whom I warned her not to trust, to clean her out like an eggshell at breakfast. I’ve no patience with such crass folly, and the best way for me to let her feel the full weight of my censure is to keep away.’

Therefore Mrs. Lipperty, to make her abhorrence more pronounced, packed up her boxes, gave her maid-of-all-work an unlimited leave, locked up the house, and went off to meditate at Herne Bay on the instability of human schemes and the faithlessness of widows with money in the Funds and other disposable property.

But, while Clapham speculated more or less correctly, Mr. Clive knew. Investigation, which with him was prompt and exhaustive, put him in possession of facts woefully conclusive. The only hope was that the pitiless delinquent might be arrested. Mac had wired from Southampton that the man had taken passage for Havre, as Mr. Clive and Lapwing had antici-

pated ; and from Havre a letter from the reliable detective informed them that a berth had been secured for New York in the French mail steamer, by Honeydew, and that he, Mac, had done the same. Nothing could be more satisfactory. There was hope. If he should be arrested he could be made to disgorge, and that his arrest was assured by the watchful attendance of Mac and a telegram to the authorities in New York, there could be no reasonable doubt.

Nevertheless, Mr. Clive felt it his duty to prepare the poor unfriended lady for the worst, and he lost no time in paying her the sad, necessary visit.

‘I have come,’ he said, taking her hand, ‘to warn you of what may happen. If it should not happen, we shall all thank God that a great disaster has been averted. If it should come about, we must view it as one of those mysterious dispensations of Divine government which may in the end prove to be to our moral, if not our material, advantage.’

Mr. Clive then related the facts with which everybody except Mrs. Sparragus was fully acquainted. He told, moreover, the sad story

of his investigations at sundry brokers' and bankers', aided by the information acquired by Lapwing in his capacity of handy-man to Honeydew, and finally of Honeydew's flight, which appeared the worst fact of all. But he entreated Mrs. Sparragus to keep a brave heart ; there was hope, he assured her, great hope, for he could not escape the hands of the law, which were, in fact, already closing upon him in the person of the trustworthy Mac, and, unless her property had been already dissipated in Honeydew's reckless speculations, it was reasonable to hope it might be recovered.

Mrs. Sparragus, stunned and speechless, was slow to realise the situation ; but, as the facts gradually stood out in their grim nakedness, the dismay and prostration which Mr. Clive had apprehended were in no way manifested. With wonderful composure she appeared to survey the altered circumstances ; serenely though sadly she admitted that the brief remainder of her life must be a struggle, but she had much to be thankful for, her life had been long and fairly happy ; and, above all, there was Flinders—Flinders was spared, and that consoled her.

Mr. Clive, incapable of deceiving or allowing her to deceive herself, assured her that it gave him infinite pain to inform her that, so far as could be ascertained, the deeds relating to Flinders had vanished, and there was every reason to fear that among the documents she had blindly signed was a legal conveyance of the property to Honeydew, and in that case it must be viewed as gone with the rest.

The announcement was crushing. Mrs. Sparragus reeled under the blow.

‘Flinders gone! The home of my happy younger days! The pride of both my husbands! The one thing I valued and intended to give to—to—oh, I could bear anything but that!’ and Mrs. Sparragus burst into a paroxysm of grief.

It was useless for Mr. Clive to endeavour to moderate her anguish; it must run its course. In silence he awaited the composure which must follow such a surrender to grief. Even Susan, with her ear at the key-hole, realised the situation too well to dare to rush unsummoned to her mistress’s aid, greatly as she felt inclined to do so; and there was a long silence, broken only by the poor lady’s sobs.

‘It was the best thing I possessed,’ she said, in broken accents, ‘the only thing I really prized, and I intended to reward,’—and again she was overcome,—‘to reward the one to whom I owe so much! I am indeed poor now!’

‘I fear, dear madam, I was precipitate in what I said. Perhaps——’

‘Oh, no; I did as you suppose. I signed the deed conveying the property to Honeydew to facilitate matters, as he suggested.’

‘He knew your intentions?’

‘Perfectly; they are in the Will.’

‘Have you the Will in your own custody?’

‘Yes; it was with the other papers, and that is the only thing left.’

Mr. Clive viewed this as a very grave proof of Honeydew’s successful appropriation of the poor lady’s property. Having the substance, anyone was welcome to the shadow of a gift which no longer existed. In grim mockery he left the paper containing the solemn distribution, while he flitted with the tangible corpus of the testator’s possession. It was hard for the kind-hearted alderman to suppress an exclamation of dismay as he contemplated the complete

destitution of the confiding woman. He felt he must hurry away lest he should betray the alarm he felt.

‘Let me leave you, dear madam, with the conviction that, come what may, you will show how a true woman can submit,’ he said, in faltering accents.

‘Yes, sir, I will try to do so.’

‘To be calm under trial is a noble and Christian virtue, and at the same time it is true philosophy; and, when disaster overtakes us through no folly of our own, half the bitterness is spared us. We feel the consolation of martyrs.’

Thereupon Mr. Clive withdrew. As he closed the door, a subdued ejaculation from Mrs. Sparragus caught his ear:

‘Flinders gone! oh, my heart will break!’

Glancing up at the terrace as he drove away, Mr. Clive noticed that the shutters and blinds both at No. 1 and No. 3 were closed. ‘Poor soul!’ he reflected, with sorrow and indignation, ‘deserted by both her so-called friends. If ever I felt it a duty to lend a protecting hand to the unfortunate, it is in this case!’ and Mr

Clive's active brain and honest heart were as busy with Mrs. Sparragus's concerns as though they had been his own.

Lena, though suffering with a strange prostration and depression which she concealed for fear of paining her attached protectors, paid daily visits to her afflicted friend, whom she comforted with the tender sympathy which seems the special attribute of woman. As a daughter she shared her sorrow, and as a friend she sustained her with the cheerful axiom of the silver lining to the darkest cloud, and why not therefore hope, even when the most threatening trouble weighs upon us, that there may, in God's providence, be a happier issue from it than we deem possible? How could such sweet counsel fail? But Mrs. Sparragus was not so absorbed in her own calamity as to be regardless of the concerns of others, and she was not long in discerning the evidences of languor in her visitor which she endeavoured to conceal from observation.

'My child,' she said, placing a gentle hand upon her, 'you look ill. What ails you, dear?'

‘Nothing—almost nothing. I feel just a little weak at times, that’s all.’

‘But your eyes look heavy. Your lips are not ruddy as they used to be. And your hands are thin and moist.’

‘Oh, dear Mrs. Sparragus, it’s only the weather. Besides, I haven’t had much exercise lately.’

‘It’s that fiddle, I believe,’ surmised Mrs. Sparragus; ‘you are working too hard, my dear child; and then you’ve been sitting day after day to the artist, eh?’

‘Yes;’ and Lena’s pale face was for a moment flushed.

‘Ah, that’s it. But it must be very pleasant to sit to such a nice, clever, noble young fellow?’

‘He is very clever.’

‘And as good as he is clever.’

‘I have no doubt he is very good.’

‘And I’m sure it must be a great delight to him to have to paint such a face,’ continued Mrs. Sparragus, smoothing her hair and passing a hand over her cheek, as a tender mother might do.

Lena hung down her head, and made no reply.

‘And, if he knew how good and true a heart beats in this gentle bosom, I do believe he would——’

‘Hush, dear. Don’t talk so of me, please!’

‘Well, my child, I won’t say any more to you. But, if ever I have the opportunity of telling Mr. Aspen that I have known you from a child, and that I don’t believe there’s a sweeter——’

‘Oh, Mrs. Sparragus!’ cried Lena, flinging herself upon the widow’s neck, ‘you will distress me beyond everything, if you speak of me to anybody in this way.’

‘But Mr. Aspen would——’

‘Mr. Aspen is a painter, and he has had to paint me, just as he paints a tree, or any other thing. Of course I am no more to him than a face to be put on canvas; and I must entreat you to promise never to try for a moment to make him think of me beyond that!’

‘Well, well, my dear child; if it pains you, I won’t.’

‘Thank you, dear Mrs. Sparragus,’ exclaimed

Lena, kissing her affectionately. 'I'm sure I can trust you not to break your promise.'

And Lena returned to Regent's Park with a sore heart.

The evil tidings had travelled to Flinders almost telephonically, for Blowers knew all about it quite as soon as Clapham; for the reason that Lapwing, representing an influential suburban journal, paid a visit next day to that salubrious resort for a personal inspection of it, with a view to a descriptive article in an early number. It was only necessary for him to state the object of his mission to be received by Blowers with effusive attention, and Lapwing was enthusiastic in his appreciation of the charms and advantages of the place.

'I must compliment you, sir, upon the arrangements here: they are perfect. I presume you are the owner of the property?' ventured Lapwing, with gush, as he strolled on to the terrace.

'Not exactly,' replied Blowers, scratching his head, as he hesitated to say more.

'It ought to be, and, in my opinion, it will be a splendid success,' continued Lapwing, admir-

ingly. 'I only wish I had a pecuniary interest in it. What a lovely view!'

'I've always had the same confidence as you, and, as the best proof of my faith, I may tell you I've a considerable stake in it,' said Blowers, with becoming pride.

'I'm glad to hear that! Ah! this sort of thing is better than journalism. You rich men have the advantage over us poor devils.'

'Oh, don't suppose I'm one of your moneyed swells! I've worked for my living, and saved a trifle, that's all.'

'And put your little pile into this prime concern, eh?' and Lapwing gushed more than ever.

'Well, yes; I've lent it to the syndicate, and get a handsome percentage.'

'Capital! And the syndicate gave you a—a bond or something? Excellent!'

'Its bond would be, as you say, excellent. But I happen to have something far, far more satisfactory,' responded Blowers, drawing himself up, in evidence of substantiality, both physical and pecuniary. 'I hold the original title-deeds!' and the manager laughed exultingly.

‘I see, Mr. Blowers, you are prudence personified. Ah, there’s nothing like caution, yet how rare it is!’ said Lapwing, taking a final survey of the premises. ‘I assure you, I have enjoyed my visit to Flinders greatly. By-the-way, is there any connection between this place and the Flinders’ Pill one hears so much about?’

‘Of course there is. The man who invented the pill invented this farm.’

‘Is it possible? And is the pill as splendid a success as the farm?’

‘It was a success as long as the patent lasted, but it expired some time ago, and the old lady who was proprietor of it gets nothing out of the pill now.’

‘An old lady, eh? What is her name?’

‘Sparragus.’

‘Sparragus, Sparragus!’ repeated Lapwing, cudgelling his brain to recall some incident associated with the name; ‘why, surely that’s not the old lady at Clapham who was cleaned out like a whistle yesterday by a man named Honey—Honeydew?’ and he looked Dick full in the face.

Dick’s substantiality did not avail him much

against the blow thus suddenly administered. He reeled under it like a drunken man, and sank into a garden-seat which Lapwing opportunely placed behind him.

‘Honeydew done this?’ he gasped, inquiringly.

‘Yes; and bolted.’

Blowers sat with fixed staring eyes and open mouth for some seconds as the curt statement travelled to his dull brain and made riot there, and the visitor prudently fixed his attention on the distant hills to afford him time to recover.

‘What a superb view!’ he exclaimed, with enthusiasm; ‘surely those are the Downs, eh?’

This little by-play afforded Blowers time to recover the semblance of composure and to reflect on the imprudence of giving evidence of mental disturbance in the presence of a stranger who, however, fortunately, was too much absorbed in his business of journalist to notice it.

‘What a picture might be painted of this scene! I dare say you have no end of artists down here?’

Blowers had by this time pulled himself together.

‘Yes; there’s a couple of them down in

the hollow yonder now, painting a dead tree.'

'Indeed! Staying here, I suppose?'

'No; they live at the cottage under the hill there. You may just see the thatched roof to the right,' and Blowers indicated the spot.

'I see,' said the journalist, noting the situation, 'rural, indeed. I may possibly get a nearer view of it as I go along the road;' and Lapwing, thanking Blowers for his civility in allowing him to inspect the famous Farm, left, and kept the thatch-roof cottage in view as he traversed the road till he reached the gate.

'Is Mr. Graham Aspen within?' he inquired of the dame who responded to his knock.

'Yes, sir, he's inside.'

'Please tell him some one has called with a message from Alderman Clive.'

Aspen immediately came to the door; anybody from Mr. Clive would be certain to receive a cordial welcome. Without needless preamble, Lapwing handed him a letter which, he said, the alderman preferred not to entrust to the post, as letters addressed to country places sometimes got delayed or even lost.

Aspen was in the act of laying his palette

preparatory to sallying forth to the blasted tree, and Jem had shouldered the easel and other paraphernalia when the visitor arrived. Opening the letter while Lapwing strolled among the flower-beds and patted the retriever that trotted up to him, Aspen found the contents to be bank-notes to the value of a hundred guineas, with a letter from Mr. Clive stating that it afforded him the greatest pleasure to be the medium of the remittance from the individual who had commissioned the portrait of Miss Lena, and which he had so ably and satisfactorily advanced towards completion. Mr. Clive added that, should he desire any further sittings, Miss Lena would be happy to attend.

Lapwing was instructed to be particular in obtaining a reply on this latter point.

The sensation of suddenly possessing a hoard of wealth for the first time in one's life is usually of the character of delirium; a delicious exaltation overcomes you; your breast heaves with its unwonted inspirations; your heart leaps with a strange joy; every object about you is irradiated; every person gracious.

Aspen, with all his reserve and nice observ-

ances, was no cynic, and he felt the intoxication of unexpected wealth. After long years of comparative destitution ; after ekeing out the slender pittance which had reverted to him by ill-requited labour with his pencil ; after forced abstention from the necessaries of life which had, in fact, brought him almost to the grave, he found himself, as by the stroke of a necromancer's wand, rich beyond the wildest of his dreams. Fortunately the bearer of the letter had his nose buried in a pot of mignonette, and did not witness an act of extravagance which proved that Aspen was both human and young. He seized Jem, flung his arms round his neck and kissed him.

‘Jem,’ he said, as tears welled in his eyes, ‘ever since I have known you you have brought me good luck. And now, see, we are millionaires ! Here’s a hundred pounds and more ! Now, thank God, we can work without a care.’

Jem, as we know, was naturally emotional, and, as we have seen, his vehemence of feeling found relief in capers. On the present occasion he danced round the room to such purpose that he swept to the ground a tin tea-

tray, which was propped against the wall decoratively, and it fell with such a thunderous clatter that it brought the good dame with a scream into the room, while Lapwing, with natural instinct, rushed to the rescue, expecting to witness a violent breach of the peace, and prepared to take somebody into custody.

To the surprise of Lapwing and the dame, Aspen was perusing the letter as if quite unconscious of the *vacarme* which had hardly ceased, and Jem, with a grin, was quietly replacing the tea-tray in its normal position as a mural ornament.

Aspen took a turn in the garden with Lapwing, and desired his grateful acknowledgments to Mr. Clive for his agency, in anticipation of the thanks which he hoped in a few days to tender personally on his return to Thistle Grove.

‘With regard to Miss Lena?’ inquired Lapwing, ‘I was to take back an answer as to her offer to sit again if you wished it.’

Aspen evinced no emotion; there was no start, no flush, not the faintest symptom of interest as the name reached him. It merely recalled the face on the canvas. Did he

need another study of the sitter? Would it be of the slightest advantage to the work as to expression, tone, or quality if he saw the subject again? No; the picture was virtually finished.

‘Thank you, no. Tell Mr. Clive, with my compliments, that I will not trouble the lady again.’

And Graham’s thoughts were instantly with the winsome nursing-sister, who so graciously sat for his service almost every day beside the dead tree. When Lapwing took the answer back, Mr. Clive seemed to have anticipated it, for he said with a sigh,

‘Poor Lena, I feared it would be so!’

The evil tidings of Mrs. Sparragus’s misfortune reached Major Twister, just as it reached every one else, and the private asylum in which he now disported was favourable for quiet meditation. And it had a peculiar and instantaneous effect upon the major. Its action was that of a tonic. It served as a mental febrifuge. In a word, it cured him. He awoke as from a morbid dream.

‘ Well, I was an ass to go to loggerheads with dear old D. and threaten to let daylight into him, and so get myself put under lock-and-key in this beastly hole, all about that silly old woman ! Bless me ! who would have believed that, simpleton as she is, she’d be crank enough to put all her coin in the way of the first sharper who came along. But, by Jove, he’s a clever fellow, that Honeydew ! How neatly he seems to have cleaned her out,—and netted it all without marrying her ! Got all the swag and made himself as scarce as a cuckoo in August. A genius, that fellow ! And here am I, reduced to rations again in my old age, and my portwine and nuts cut off, and I’m told to help myself to cod-liver oil, all along of that old figure ! Hang it ! I’ll send a shot into old D. through the post ! ’ and the major sat down at his desk.

He assured dear old D. he was dying to embrace him and make amends for that absurd letter written after copious libations elsewhere than at the pump. He need not be afraid to pay him a visit, for the deadliest weapon in his

possession was his tooth-brush. If his dear D. would come and fetch him out of that filthy den he swore he would drink every drop of physic he liked to send him in future. But as for the beastly Flinders' Pill—bah! he would not touch one with a pair of tongs! And as for Sparagus! why, even the succulent vegetable which the name suggested, and which he used to be partial to, would henceforward be tabooed!

The Commissioners in Lunacy, paying their periodical visit, came to the conclusion, which the medical attendant and Dr. Dimbledon confirmed, that the major's little aberration, consequent upon sunstroke in India, had so greatly moderated that the homicidal tendency which had been manifested had entirely passed off, and they therefore certified for his discharge.

Dr. Dimbledon found the major marching to and fro in a corner of the grounds with the rhythmic precision of a sentinel on duty, keeping aloof from the other patients, who were scattered about industriously engaged according to their respective peculiarities, haranguing, moping, laughing, skipping, sky-gazing, and what not. The moment he caught sight of the

doctor, the gallant major snatched off his wig, which he tossed high in the air, exclaiming, 'Thank God! D., you've come to take me out of this bear-garden!' and he flung himself into the arms of the enemy he had intended to run through the body.

D. had a phaeton at the door, and, on his inquiring whether he proposed to take residence again at Flinders, the major preferred to run up to town and secure chambers near his club. He did not explain to Dr. Dimbledon the reason for this decision, for it did not seem altogether heroic in a gallant major, whose silken sabretasche, suspended on the wall of his chamber, was evidence that he had worn Her Majesty's uniform, to do so,—the fact being that he was afraid to encounter the boy in buttons.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEAD TREE.

GRAHAM ASPEN'S contentment and Jem's jubilation over the little fortune which had, as it seemed, dropped from the skies into their common pocket, lasted about an hour, for, at the expiration of that period, their flattering visions of relief from anxiety as to ways and means, so paralysing to the artistic mind, gave place to quite another train of thoughts and sentiments.

The two friends resumed the march interrupted by Lapwing, and, seizing the paraphernalia of their craft, sallied forth in the direction of the dead tree—*fatale arvum*! towards which Aspen seemed drawn by a strange influence. Anxiously scanning the scene, Graham quickly

discerned the object of his search,—Mrs. Beaver and her young companion advancing towards the same bourne.

It was to be the last sitting, Mrs. Beaver and her colleague being on the point of quitting the neighbourhood, and Aspen was conscious of a troubled feeling as the thought recurred that the kind and gracious personage whose presence had redeemed the work on his easel from a picture of utter desolation and decay, was no longer to lend the contrast of youth and health and beauty to the weird, dead tree. Graham felt the folly of permitting sentiment, however vague, to disturb the stoical relationship which exists between the painter and his casual sitter. All feeling, all faculties of head and heart are, at such times, concentrated on his art. He is, on these occasions, sequestered from the questions which at other times rule and pervade him. He rises superior to the susceptibilities of common humanity, for the only passion which possesses him is the sublime faculty of presenting Nature as in a mirror, truthfully and therefore beautifully.

Graham combated the feeling which stealthily

assailed him, and courteously, even coldly, saluting his visitors, he proceeded to take his position, while Jem gallantly conducted Hester to the tree-side and arranged her in accordance with the position adopted. Mrs. Beaver, deeming her presence undesirable, explored the wood, culling wild-flowers for a nosegay.

Aspen worked rapidly ; a touch here, a touch there, put in with unfaltering precision, was always the needed touch to maintain the harmonious progress of the picture. But his brush returned again and again with a fascinated obedience to the human episode. The outline, the pose, the serene and saddened feeling pervading the modest figure, by the dead tree fixed his interest to the exclusion of all the rest, and he would certainly have elaborated it still more if Jem had not recalled him to a condition of artistic sobriety by saying,

‘Oh, Mr. Aspen, you will spoil your picture ! Are you not bringing that figure too forward ?’

The admonition was as timely as it was sagacious, and Graham’s painting was saved from a discordant note.

Mrs. Beaver, returning laden with ferns and

flowers, nearly dropped her collection in her surprise and admiration of the picture :

‘Why, I never saw anything so wonderful !
To think it’s only a bit of paint !’

‘Yes,’ quietly responded Aspen, amused,
‘there’s about twopennyworth of it.’

‘That may be, sir, but I dare say your twopennyworth of paint is now worth twenty pounds—if not more ?’

Graham shrugged his shoulders.

‘But I suppose twenty pounds wouldn’t buy it, sir ? Because, if it could be bought for that, a friend of mine would like above all things to have it.’

‘Your friend does me great honour,’ replied Graham, surprised at such a proposal from a person in Mrs. Beaver’s position, ‘but I have no intention now of parting with this picture.’

By this time Hester had rejoined Mrs. Beaver, and they both viewed the painting with intense interest ; and Mrs. Beaver, seizing an opportunity when they were quite alone, whispered in Hester’s ear,

‘He refuses to sell it.’

Whether the announcement had any effect

upon the younger woman could not be decidedly affirmed, but an expression of disappointment which at first passed over her usually placid face was followed by a smile which seemed to indicate pleasure.

Mrs. Beaver strolled away to join Jem, who was hurriedly noting in his sketch-book a passing sky effect in water-colours.

Graham advanced to Hester.

‘You are leaving this place,’ he said, in faltering accents.

‘Yes, sir, though we would gladly have remained longer in this pretty country; but, you know, our life is not an idle one,—there is plenty for us to do.’

‘Yes, you devote yourselves to good deeds.’

‘We nurse the sick.’

‘You have certainly made a beautiful choice for the exercise of your gifts.’

Hester was silent.

‘I think there is nothing I admire more than a free-will surrender of oneself to such a work.’

‘The rewards one meets with are very sweet,’ replied Hester, raising her eyes to Graham’s.

‘The rewards cannot be too great for the

deserts,' he said, gazing into her face with a deep interest not altogether free from sadness; 'had you remained longer, I should have ventured to ask you to permit me to make a study of your head.'

'Unfortunately we have to leave, you see,' replied Hester, without noticing the compliment conveyed in Aspen's speech, though her cheeks were for an instant flushed.

'True; and I am already under too great a debt for the assistance you have rendered me, to the immense advantage of my picture.'

'If I have been of any real use, it will be an additional pleasure for me to remember.'

The simple words, unaffectedly spoken, thrilled Aspen strangely. Whether it was the tone of voice or the confession that the meetings had been a pleasure to her which would not be forgotten, he could not explain, but at that moment, for the first time in his life, he gazed with impassioned earnestness upon the face of woman.

'I should like, if I may so far presume, to know the name of my sitter,' he presently said, suddenly awakening to a sense of the indiscre-

tion, if not impropriety, of allowing a chance acquaintance to disturb the quiet tenor of his life.

‘They call me Sister Hester ;’ and her face again glowed with colour.

‘I asked the question,’ continued Graham, combating his emotions, ‘because I had a feeling that we must have met before. Your voice seems to take me back somewhere.’

Hester’s first impulse was to revert to the meeting in Dr. Eustace’s waiting-room, but the occasion, she remembered, was not a happy one ; he had fainted, as Dr. Eustace had explained, for want of sufficient food, and to recall it might give pain.

‘We may have met somewhere,’ she replied, slightly averting her face, and preparing to withdraw, as Mrs. Beaver had rejoined her.

‘Do look at this charming bit of sky!’ exclaimed Mrs. Beaver, beckoning Hester, and directing her attention to Jem’s sketch. ‘Isn’t it lovely!’

‘It is indeed beautiful,’ replied Hester, with enthusiasm,—‘it is a perfect gem!’ and she gave proof of her appreciation by commenting upon

the skilful gradation of light and the natural way in which the colours merged into each other.

‘Oh, it’s only a poor daub,’ said Jem, laughing; ‘I happen to have a weakness for skies.’

‘I call it strength,’ retorted Hester, with genuine warmth. ‘So far as it goes, it is perfect.’

Jem tore the leaf from his book.

‘If it is worth offering you, will you accept it?’ he said, simply and cordially.

‘Oh, sir, I couldn’t——’

‘Nay, take it, please,’ interposed Graham—‘take it as a little souvenir from my young friend. It will serve to recall——’ he could get no further, his brain was confused; that voice seemed to carry him back far, far, even to his childhood;—but he must master the absurd weakness,—he must not give way to his morbid fancy. ‘Take it, Sister Hester,’ he continued, recovering his self-command; ‘my young friend wishes it. You will not pain him by refusing it?’

‘I shall value it as one of my treasures,’ replied the young woman, placing it between the

leaves of her book, 'and I shall inscribe the date upon it that this day may never be forgotten.'

Graham and Jem saluted their two visitors as they withdrew, and in a few minutes their forms gradually vanished over the hill, until they were lost to view, and Graham's field of vision became a blank.

When they were alone, Jem related to his master the sad news of Mrs. Sparragus's misfortune, as narrated by Mrs. Beaver while he was sketching the cloud, and the tidings of the cruel injury filled Graham with sorrow and indignation.

'Robbed!' he exclaimed—'ruined! I can't believe anything so monstrous as the cold-blooded robbery of such a simple, trusting old woman.' And Jem recited the details as given by Mrs. Beaver.

For several minutes Graham was lost in meditation, and Jem, seeing the hopelessness of more work, quietly limbered up, preparatory to returning whenever his master should give the signal.

'Jem,' said Aspen, suddenly brightening up, and laying a hand upon his companion's shoul-

der, 'when we received this bundle of money,' and he took the bank-notes from his pocket, 'we acted as the common herd acts—we exulted in the prospect of spending it, eh?'

'No; we exulted in the thought of being able to pay our way,' quietly suggested Jem, correcting his master's unwarranted assumption.

'Nay, Jem, we gloated over it in a way unworthy of men who have at our fingers' ends the power to coin the little we need to supply our wants. Mine,' he added, solemnly, 'are few, and may soon be none at all;' and he thought of Dr. Eustace's unfavourable prediction as he drew a deep breath. 'It is not noble of us, Jem, to be avaricious.'

'Really, sir,' remonstrated Jem, who was the least avaricious of mankind, 'I can't think you mean——'

'No, Jem; I used the wrong word. I should have said selfish.'

Jem could not admit that it was selfish to receive payment for work honestly done, and he said so.

'I haven't quite explained myself,' pursued

Graham ; ‘ I was contemplating poor Mrs. Sparragus’s position in contrast with ours.’

‘ Ah, the contrast is sad indeed.’

‘ Does anything occur to your generous heart, Jem, in this hour of our prosperity ?’

Jem saw Graham’s notion instantly.

‘ I’d present her with ten pounds,’ he answered, gaily.

‘ Ten pounds !—only ten ?’

‘ Well, sir, you might perhaps go as far as twenty under the circumstances ;’ and Jem felt he had made a magnificent concession, and awaited his master’s commendation.

‘ Jem, knowing your good and generous nature ; remembering that you have given me your time, your care, your little savings out of your money-box when you knew I needed it, I cannot quite understand why you should be so niggardly to this unfortunate lady !’

Jem looked amazed. He was more and more bewildered. He had voted a fifth of their fund—Aspen called it their fund—to a person they hardly knew, and whom Aspen had already happily snatched from imminent death, and thus rendered an inestimable service ; surely that was

as much as could reasonably be done by anyone.

‘What more would you do, sir?’ he asked, in despair.

‘Jem, I should have recognised your nature and disposition if you had replied, “Give the dear soul a hundred.”’

Jem opened his eyes and mouth wider than they had ever been opened before, and Graham was at first fearful of asphyxia, and commenced rubbing and punching him in the ribs, as the only remedial measure that occurred to him; but Jem dispelled his apprehensions by replying, as soon as he had recovered his breath,

‘I made a mistake, I ought to have said a hundred;’ and Jem groaned, partly from the effects of the friction and partly at the thought that their precious hoard was going at one fell swoop.

‘That’s a fine spirit, my dear boy, and worthy of the artist you are! I will take your advice;’ (Jem groaned aloud) ‘we’ll do it at once. It will help the poor, confiding old soul to tide over pressing claims, and show her that if she has a declared enemy, she has a secret friend;

and, believe me, Jem, no expenditure of the coin on ourselves, no indulgence we could buy with it, will be half so sweet or half so profitable as this little act of charity.'

Jem was convinced. His economical instincts yielded and took flight in the presence of his master's generous enthusiasm. Aspen's self-denial was contagious; Jem had already learnt to see that whatever he did was the right thing to do, and his faith in Aspen's nobility of character was only confirmed by this latest proof of it. Yes; it would be an uncommon employment of his newly-acquired wealth, and as praiseworthy as it was uncommon.

Then, like a couple of paladins, the two friends took counsel together as they walked homeward as to the best means of carrying out their chivalrous scheme, and they agreed that the gift must be anonymous. Aspen had already given proof of his opinion that to be thanked for a gift or a service was to be in a manner paid for it. A kind act was, according to his moral code, robbed of its grace if the doer of it tarried to be praised.

It was strange how Aspen's interests in life

multiplied with improving health. Until quite recently he viewed himself as an anchorite by destiny. In the isolation of his modest chamber, struggling against his united adversaries, ill-health and carking necessity, he had grown indifferent, and in that dark hour in the New Forest he was even mad, and it was only in the spasmodic exercise of the art he loved that he could discover that existence was something more than pain and sorrow.

But the appearance of Jem in his narrow world was as the dawn of a brighter day, for, simultaneously with that event, some of the vigour proper to youth seemed to assert itself, and activity, hope, and artistic skill became less fitful. And the recluse who had discovered that his heart could respond to the affection Jem felt for him, found that friendship, true and tried, was a precious thing to have and to give, and it was his happy fortune to possess this rare thing in Dr. Eustace and Mr. Clive. And his heart, once opened to these human influences, seemed more and more receptive of them. He was more easily reached. He viewed mankind through a clearer and a healthier medium. He

learnt that, if there is evil in the heart of man, there is a wonderful amount of goodness, and that, on the whole, the goodness preponderates. He saw it in Mrs. Beaver; it was charmingly exemplified in Sister Hester,—oh, how evident it was in her face, her action, her demeanour! and how that poor, dear, wronged woman, Mrs. Sparragus, had given proof of it on the day he had so happily been instrumental in her preservation, desiring to testify it by some act which he had churlishly disdained. Aspen thus awoke to the fact that life was full of possible joys and opportunities of service, and that to ignore the one and deny the other is to violate the first law of existence on earth.

The friends returned to Brompton the following day, full of the beneficent scheme they had resolved upon, and which the night's reflections had only confirmed. Jem took a letter containing the bank-notes received from Lapwing to No. 2, Tapioca Terrace, addressed to Mrs. Sparragus, begging her to accept, as a token of sympathy with her in the cruel wrong she had sustained, this gift from one who, though almost a stranger, claimed the privilege of employing

the means placed in his hands by Providence, in the way such means were intended to be employed by the Giver of all.

Susan, whose eyes were red with crying as her arms were with work, took the letter to her mistress, who was in her room gazing alternately on the portraits of the late Flinders and the late Sparragus, holding imaginary conversation with one defunct spouse and then with the other on the calamity which had befallen her, eliciting their opinions which, with their eyes fixed upon her and following her as she moved about the room, were decidedly condemnatory.

‘Yes,’ she said, sighing, ‘I know I deserve it for my folly in trusting anyone after you. I ought to have known better, but you were both so good and kind to me, you spoilt me!’

The portraits seemed to frown and reply: ‘We did, and this is the consequence.’

‘Oh, it is too true! If you had neglected me, and left me to shift for myself a bit, it would have done me good and sharpened my wits.’

‘Then you mean to say it’s our fault?’ the

fierce eyes seemed to say as they glared on the penitent widow from the wall.

‘No, no! It’s all mine, and only mine! I didn’t know the value of what you did for me, so I didn’t deserve it, and this is just retribution, and I can bear it all—except losing the farm!’

The portraits seemed to start in their frames, and their eyes to flash fire: ‘The farm lost!’

‘Yes!’ she answered, abashed; ‘I was indolent, and made over the title-deeds to him to avoid all bother, and of course he took advantage of it.’

‘You didn’t deserve the farm,’ scowled the painted husbands.

‘I didn’t! I didn’t! but it will break my heart if you——’

‘Please, mem, here’s a letter,’ interposed Susan, alarmed at her mistress’s ‘goings-on,’ and thinking it her duty to recall her to her senses. ‘It won’t do no good, mem, you raving about that wagabone, Honeydew, which I think a better name would be Pizon, for he’s pizoned your happiness and mine too! and I know I shall never again have such a good missus!’ and

Susan burst into tears as she handed the letter to Mrs. Sparragus.

‘My good girl,’ remonstrated the latter, touched by the girl’s grief, ‘you are young, and have, I hope, a long life before you, and you will, I trust, be happy, as you deserve to be; and when you’re older you’ll think of me as a foolish, easy old woman who only gave you food and shelter and a poor twelve pounds a-year for all your care and devotion.’

‘Oh, mem,’ replied Susan, cut to the quick by her mistress’s prophetic sketch of her future opinion, ‘don’t say “only,” mem! I’m sure you have been wonderful kind to me; and, as for wages, I’d serve you for nothink, if you’d let me, and I should be proud and ’appy to do it, mem!’ and Susan’s ruddy cheeks streamed with her honest tears.

‘My good Susan, I feel grateful for such devotion; it’s more than I deserve. As long as I have a home you shall not leave me, unless you wish it. But you know, when people lose their all, there are only two places left for them,—the union or the grave, and then, in either case, my good girl, we must part.’

‘Oh, mem!’ and Susan, in the intensity of her grief, could say no more. She buried her face in her apron and rushed from the room, leaving her mistress hardly less moved, who reflected within herself, ‘I am not friendless with such a faithful girl as that clinging to me! Truly, misfortune is not an unmixed evil,—it teaches us many precious things, and among them it shows us our true friends!’

Mrs. Sparragus opened the letter which Susan had placed in her hands, and when her eyes fell upon the contents, which she had surmised was an ordinary circular, she was fairly dumbfounded. Bank of England notes! a veritable pile of money! Surely it must be another dream! If not a dream, the man, Honeydew, had in mercy sent her the wherewithal to live for the present; and Mrs. Sparragus, leaping to this generous conclusion, felt ready to forgive the traitor who had plundered her. But the accompanying unsigned letter dispelled the supposition, and Mrs. Sparragus was at once floundering about in a sea of conjecture. Who could the donor be? Towards whom should the gratitude which was ready to

burst from her heart be turned? Was there in the wide world a single friend capable of this anonymous act of generosity? Could it be Mrs. Lipperty? Impossible. Lena? Yes, Lena was quite the one to do it; but she had not the means. Mr. Clive? Ah, that was the source of it! The act was characteristic of him. His habit of private beneficence was well-known; Lena had often talked of it. Undoubtedly, the gift was from him. It was noble; it was Christian-like—it seemed providential,—she would not pain the generous heart by exhibiting a foolish pride, she would use it in all thankfulness and humility as a gift from the Dispenser of all good.

When Susan re-entered the room, she found her mistress's face beaming with a contentedness which recent circumstances could not, in her opinion, justify.

‘Why, mem, excuse me, but you don’t look like the same you was just now!’ she exclaimed, her own features throwing off the dolorous cast which they had worn. ‘I can’t make it out.’

‘My good girl,’ replied Mrs. Sparragus, with

gravity, 'God is good to us when we least expect it, and, perhaps, least deserve it. The letter you brought me comes like an answer to our prayers for help and protection.'

And Mrs. Sparragus, having no idea of reservation or mystery with her faithful handmaiden, spread before her the contents of the letter.

'Oh, mem, I never!' was all the astonished Susan could give utterance to. It exhausted her vocabulary of wonderment. She had recourse to gesture, and clasped her hands, pressing them against her heaving bosom; 'and you don't know who sent it?' she asked, incredulous of her eyes and ears.

'No, Susan; I can only guess.'

'It's dear Miss Lena's doing!' archly suggested Susan, who was really a very sagacious girl.

'It's what dear Lena would have done, if she could, but it is not in her power to do this.'

'Then it's the alderman!' and Susan, observing by her mistress's smile that she acquiesced in that conjecture, laughed hysterically.

‘You’ve read my thoughts, Susan!’ answered Mrs. Sparragus; ‘it is the good Mr. Clive.’

‘Not a doubt, mem,’ responded Susan, whose favourite speculation as to the impending alliance of her mistress with the alderman, which had received a rude shock, was now revived; ‘and it’s only right he should.’

Mrs. Sparragus’s start of amazement at this rejoinder, as she ejaculated, ‘Susan! what do you mean by that remark?’ satisfied the young woman that matters had not altogether reached the desired maturity, and she was on the point of endeavouring to explain away the obscure doctrine she had laid down, when her attention was diverted by the sound of wheels, and, glancing through the window, she exclaimed,

‘Why, if here isn’t the alderman hisself! There! I knew I was right!’

CHAPTER VII.

BAFFLED.

WHEN Mr. Clive entered the house, there was on his face an expression of anxious thought which Susan considered quite out of harmony with his recent magnificent act of gallantry and devotion to the afflicted and lonely widow ; and Mrs. Sparragus, also noticing his dejected air, rightly conjectured that the investigations so energetically made by the kind alderman in her interest had resulted unsatisfactorily.

When he took her hand, and inquired as to her health, Mr. Clive's features resumed their normal cheeriness, and she was reassured.

‘Thank you,’ she replied. ‘I feel so much better within the last hour ;’ and she emphasised

the closing words, and looked at her visitor with a beaming smile.

Mr. Clive was much gratified, and not a little surprised, at the frame of mind in which he found her. He trusted it might continue, and added that a patient and hopeful heart was a very precious possession in this world of trial. Mr. Clive spoke with a significant gravity, which could not fail to impress his hearer.

‘Yes, sir, none of us escape trials. Yesterday I felt crushed, but this morning——’ and she smiled in his face again.

‘This morning?’ echoed Mr. Clive, awaiting, with curiosity, the completion of the sentence, and an explanation of the smile.

‘This morning I found that my trouble had brought to light a true friend, and it makes me feel so happy that I can hardly remember my loss in thinking of what I have gained.’

Mr. Clive was more perplexed than ever, and begged for an explanation.

‘Ah, sir,’ replied Mrs. Sparragus, with tears in her eyes, ‘how can I tell you what I think of your generosity to me!’ and a choking in the

throat prevented her giving the explanation desired.

Mr. Clive could only wait for it in silence.

‘So unexpected, so timely, and, oh, so modestly and beautifully done!’ and Mrs. Sparragus again relapsed into her pocket-handkerchief.

‘I really——’

‘Yes, Mr. Clive, I know. It’s your noble way of doing good. But you’ll have your reward! And I hope it will be in this world as well as in the next!’ and, if Susan had witnessed the admiring gaze Mrs. Sparragus focussed upon the alderman, she would have felt more and more confident that the publication of the banns was only a question of days.

‘It is delightful to hear you express yourself in these gracious terms, Mrs. Sparragus, but evidently——’

‘Oh, yes, Mr. Clive, I quite understand, you desire that your splendid gift of this morning should be, like all your good deeds, secret. It is your way, and I wouldn’t, I couldn’t make the bad return of alluding to it, beyond offering to you my truest, deepest, best thanks!’ and

the pocket-handkerchief was again in active requisition.

Mr. Clive now saw that some event to her advantage had occurred, and that he was credited with it, and he felt it necessary to elicit the facts.

‘Will you gratify me by letting me know what it is for which I am receiving your gratitude?’

‘Why, for the bank-notes you sent me this morning, of course!’ and Mrs. Sparragus gave a triumphant chuckle in bringing conviction home to the anonymous donor.

Mr. Clive could hardly maintain the composure which he felt the occasion required.

‘I should like to see them for a moment,’ he said.

‘Certainly; if anyone has a right to do so, it is you, sir!’ replied Mrs. Sparragus, opening her work-box and handing the letter to her visitor. ‘I’m not a prophetess, but I should say it is not the first time you have set eyes on them, Mr. Clive!’ she added, with arch humour.

Mr. Clive spread open the packet, read the

letter, and, observing the numbers of the notes which he recognised, he replied,

‘I suppose I must confess that I have seen them before.’

‘I felt certain of it. Susan was as sure as I was that it was you!’

‘You and Susan are both too good in your opinion of me. However, if you will promise to make use of the money, some day I will tell you a little history connected with these notes.’

It was a subtle appeal on the part of Mr. Clive to the curiosity of womankind in general, and it elicited the desired promise from Mrs. Sparragus.

‘I couldn’t be so ungrateful, sir, as to pain you by refusing it. But, oh, I have no right to such wonderful kindness!’ and the poor widow was overwhelmed with conflicting emotions, leaving Mr. Clive in uninterrupted meditation.

‘When have I done a thing so noble as this poor artist!’ he reflected. ‘I give of my abundance: it costs me nothing. I have not one luxury or pleasure less, so I am in no way impoverished. But this young man, with a splendid forgetfulness of himself which is surely

divinely inspired, gives, not of his superfluity, but his all ! He gives without hesitation his hard earnings—his very bread ! and, shrinking from the honour which attaches to such an action, he does it by stealth and only claims to be the instrument of Providence. Assuredly this young man's principles are as exalted as his talent is great.'

Mrs. Sparragus having recovered her former composure, Mr. Clive resumed the interrupted conversation :

'I did not, as you will believe, come here to talk about the bank-notes.'

'Oh, no, sir, I'm quite certain of that.'

'My object in paying this visit was to report the result of my investigations with reference to this sad, sad business.'

'How shall I ever thank you enough !'

'What I have to say will entitle me to no thanks, for it is not the good news I hope to bring you.'

'I'm sure you have done all that it is in the power of anyone to do, and for that I am deeply grateful.'

'Some persons, from a mistaken kindness,

would withhold from you anything of a painful nature, but I feel I should be showing want of confidence in your moral strength if I kept you in ignorance of facts which concern you so nearly.'

'How good of you, sir!'

'I have already told you that, on enquiry at the various places of business, we found that Honeydew had sold your funded property and everything else you had placed in his custody and turned them into cash, and, after raising enough money on the security of Flinders, had gone abroad.'

'Yes, sir, I know all this. Is Flinders absolutely lost?'

'Absolutely.'

Mrs. Sparragus, notwithstanding her great self-control, groaned in anguish.

'Unfortunately you signed a document conveying it to Honeydew. It became his, and he has lodged the deeds with Blowers, the manager of the farm.'

'Oh, Mr. Blowers will return them to me.'

'No; in the first place, he has lent a sum of money upon the security—which, of course,

might be easily arranged,—but the property being vested in Honeydew, no one else but Honeydew can claim them.’

‘Oh, but Honeydew, when he knows——’

‘He will never know. He can never return them. Honeydew is dead.’

‘Dead!’

It was a perilous thing on the part of Mr. Clive to make known the startling and appalling fact without preamble. He reckoned upon her naturally equable temperament, but he had not considered the paramount feature of her character—sympathy, and his announcement opened the flood-gates of it.

‘Dead!’ she exclaimed, ‘poor Mr. Honeydew dead! So suddenly! Cut off in the midst of his busy, busy life!’ and Mrs. Sparragus clasped her hands in her distress.

Some minutes elapsed before the good woman could recover speech, and Mr. Clive contemplated her disinterestedness with admiration.

‘How true,’ he reflected, ‘is the Christian precept—that the greatest of all human graces is charity! This defrauded woman already forgives her pitiless spoiler!’

‘What was it that carried him off?’ she asked, in tones of commiseration.

‘I will tell you. One of our detective police, named Mac, stationed at Southampton, acting on Lapwing’s information, took a berth for Havre and subsequently for New York in the same vessel as Honeydew. We have been anxiously awaiting news from Mac, and to-day the mail brought us a letter from him. I would read it, if I felt sure you could bear to hear it.’

‘I can bear it, sir.’

‘It contains intelligence of a distressing nature.’

‘I can bear it. Poor Mr. Honeydew!’

‘The letter runs thus: “Everything satisfactory after we left Havre. I got a berth in the cabin adjoining Honeydew, and he was never out of my sight, excepting at night. At first he was shy of everyone, and he hardly gave a civil answer when I spoke to him; but after two or three days rubbing shoulders with him at meals and offering him a Manilla, telling queer stories in the smoking-saloon and playing poker with him, we got to be quite friendly. I had shown the captain my credentials and

given him the tip, so he kept his eye on our friend if I happened to be away, and it was arranged that, when the pilot-boat came alongside, I should send a despatch ashore to the authorities, so that there should be no hitch. As we neared Sandy Hook, I noticed our friend get shy again; lost his appetite; refused my cigars, and wouldn't play poker, and took to writing. Thinks I, 'That'll be something interesting, if one could only read it. Perhaps it's a little history of how he did it. Perhaps it's about some speculations he's got in his mind. and what he means to do with the cash,' for I often saw him overhauling his pocket-book which was stuffed with bank-notes. Well, when we made Sandy Hook and got fairly into the roads, he was a-walking up and down the saloon deck, with a rapid step, as though something troubled his mind, and, of course, I was taking a constitutional too, when he suddenly stopped, and beckoning to me he says, 'Mac, my dear fellow, are you fond of adventures?' 'Well, yes,' says I, 'fairly so, if they're interesting.' 'Would you like to read something I have been jotting down just to pass the

time?' 'Indeed, Honeydew, I should vastly.' (It was the very thing I had been longing to get hold of.) 'Very well,' says he, quite bright, 'as I know you will appreciate what I've been writing, you may see it, if you don't mind going to my cabin, and, if you open my courier's bag, you'll find the paper in it.' (I had been longing to see the inside of that very bag!) 'And, if you'll shell out another of your Manillas, I'll smoke it while you're gone.' 'Right,' says I; and down I went pretty sharp after handing him my cigar-case and giving the captain a wink as I passed under the bridge, where he was standing. The captain gave two winks in reply, which meant 'All right, I'll keep an eye on him till you come back.' I got to his berth, but before I could open the bag there was a tremendous hullabaloo on deck, 'Man overboard! Heave a line! Throw out a life-buoy! Lower a boat!' I flew up the stairs, rushed to the side of the vessel, where everyone was crowding, and I was only just in time to see a small object like a cork bobbing up and down in the sea a quarter-of-a-mile

behind the ship. In another moment it sank for ever. It was Honeydew !”’

‘Drowned!’ cried Mrs. Sparragus, in irrepressible horror. ‘Drowned?’

‘Unhappily, yes. Boats were lowered, Mac jumped into one of them, and they rowed over the spot where he was last seen. It was too late, Honeydew was prisoned in the deep waters.’

‘He fell into the sea by accident?’

‘No, by design. He chose to rush into the presence of his Maker rather than submit to the judgment of man for his baseness to you.’

‘Oh, Mr. Clive, to think that I should have been the cause of such an awful death! Poor Mr. Honeydew!’

‘The thing to deplore is that he should have crowned his many sins by this worst of crimes.’

‘Oh, I would have forgiven him all the wrong he did me rather than this should have happened!’ exclaimed Mrs. Sparragus, with genuine distress.

‘I am sure you would. But sometimes pity is misapplied. He did not merit even your

posthumous sympathy. He was base towards you even to the last moment of his life.'

Mrs. Sparragus looked incredulous.

'To satisfy you that I am doing no injustice to the memory of this man, I will read you the paper to which he had referred when he sent Mac to his cabin. It runs thus: "I think this is about the first time in my life that I have been outwitted, and I don't mean it to happen again. But I must do Lapwing the justice to say he did his bit of acting uncommonly well. Mac is quite second-rate compared with him. Of course I'm checkmated, and I throw up the sponge so far as to admit it. But I'm not going to allow the good people who put Lapwing and Mac on to this job to make much coin out of its success. I might have left that old simpleton, Mrs. Sparragus, some stray sprats out of the haul; but if I did they would be pounced upon by that hypocritical and rapacious old cat at No. 1, and, as I shouldn't die happy if I thought she would get anything beyond the cuckoo-clock and plated soup-ladle, it will all have to go along with me, and I don't think that even that avaricious hag, Mrs. Lipperty, will care to

follow me to get hold of it. I suppose Lapwing was put on by Clive, and, if Lapwing hadn't been the veriest booby to look at, I should have been a match for the alderman. Now I see I'm like a rat in a cage. I twigged Mac the second day out, and then the whole thing dawned upon me. It was cleverly done, I admit, and I now see, by the captain's oblique glances at me, that he has had the straight tip from Mac. So, as I know what's in store for me as soon as we touched land, (for no doubt Clive has wired to New York), and as I don't like the idea of the Tombs, the hulks, and the silent system, I mean to circumvent all these clever people by making a hole in the sea and taking every dollar with me. I may tell Mrs. Sparragus that, as soon as I had turned her money over in the American market and made my pile, I should have repaid the *loan* with interest, but, as she has thought proper to allow Clive to meddle and spoil the business all round, she'll have to do without it in this world.—STEPHEN HONEYDEW.”’

Mrs. Sparragus buried her face in her hands and sobbed without the ability to speak. The

grief she felt was not that her whole means of livelihood lay fathoms deep in the Atlantic, but that the once-trusted, once-honoured spoiler lay there unshriven, unconfessed.

Mr. Clive had discharged his painful duty, he had only to add, in answer to her generous suggestion that it might have been an accident, that, as soon as Mac had descended to the cabin, Honeydew was observed by the captain to walk to the stern of the vessel, button his coat across his breast, step over the rail, and plunge headlong into the foaming billows with a laugh which the crew described as demoniacal.

A strict search in Honeydew's berth was at once instituted. The courier's sack contained the document to which he had alluded, some tobacco, and a newspaper, in which an advertisement appeared, notifying the sale at the auction mart of the freehold of Tapioca Terrace.

This concluding detail in Mac's dispatch was an unexpected shock to Mr. Clive. He had heard nothing of this last supreme imprudence of Mrs. Sparragus. Had the property been actually sold? Lapwing was dispatched to the auctioneer, and brought back the very perplexing

confirmation of his fears. Tapioca Terrace had been included in the same deed as Flinders and had been sold at the mart by order of Honeydew, and paid for the day before his departure for America.

Mr. Clive did not hesitate to question Mrs. Sparragus on the subject :

‘Did you deposit the title-deeds of these three houses with Honeydew?’

‘He took charge of all my valuable papers for safety.’

‘Did you convey Tapioca Terrace to him?’

‘I don’t think I did.’

‘Then you are not aware that it was fully described and included in the indenture which you signed conveying Flinders to him?’

‘Oh, no. He never told me it was included.’

‘And you did not read the document before signing it?’

‘I did not. Mr. Honeydew said it was not necessary. But, sir, you don’t mean to say these houses are gone as well as Flinders?’ demanded the bereaved and credulous woman, as the possibility of such a crowning disaster began to dawn upon her mind. ‘These houses ——’

‘Are as irrecoverably lost as Flinders.’

To say that Mrs. Sparragus was dazed on hearing this announcement is hardly to express the conflict of bewilderment, pain and paralysis of the reasoning faculties which overcame her like a distressing dream, as its full significance reached her brain. She was speechless. She realised at last a condition of things which she sometimes figured to herself as the most dolorous result in a worldly sense of human inconsequence and folly,—the loss of all that the world recognises as a passport to respect, and she felt already the chilling indifference, the scathing censure, the pitiless scorn reserved for the squanderer of hereditary wealth, of which Mrs. Lipperty had already given her a foretaste.

With no vain reproaches directed against her base betrayer, with no wild lamentations over a dire visitation, of which her conscience acquitted her, did the poor woman give expression to the anguish of her heart. She simply buried her face in her handkerchief and surrendered herself to relieving tears.

Mr. Clive closed his eyes and was lost in

thought. His busy brain surveyed the entire situation, just as an expert chess-player contemplates blindfolded the field of mimic battle in which he finds himself worsted. All avenues to escape seem barred; science for once is apparently of no avail—checkmate is threatened, and the baffled player is ready to resign. But Mr. Clive, like a strategist who is slow to admit that fate is against him, viewed the desperate state of affairs with the composure characteristic of him in all difficulties, and presently a smile which traversed his thoughtful features, and a momentary play of the mouth, would have been interpreted by a physiognomist as eloquent of a state of mind far removed from despair and imminent surrender. He quietly rose, while poor Mrs. Sparragus was still wrapt in her uncomplaining grief, and left the room. In the hall he encountered the inevitable Susan—faithful sentinel, always on guard—and, whispering, he said,

‘Go to your mistress. Comfort her with your sympathy and care; you have been true to her in her prosperity, and I know you will cling to her now.’

‘But, oh, sir!’ sobbed Susan, in the greatest distress, ‘my poor missus will never get over it.’

‘You must do your best, nevertheless, to cheer her. Remember, whatever happens, kindness to those in trouble is never thrown away. Good deeds, Susan, if they fail of their intention, return to the doer of them. If they make no one else happy, they bring the happiness home again; so it is not wasted.’

As soon as the door closed behind the alderman, Susan hurried to her mistress, and, flinging herself on to her knees beside her, she clasped her in her arms, and her sympathy, too deep for her simple language, expressed itself in a flood of tears.

And Mr. Clive, regaining his carriage, ordered his servant to bid the coachman drive to Tangle and Wrench, Mrs. Sparragus’s solicitors.

CHAPTER VIII.

JEM'S FIRST PATRON.

WHEN Graham Aspen reached his modest chamber in Thistle Grove, he found two letters which had just arrived lying on his table. One was from Messieurs Glare and Gooley, saying their Mr. Gooley would do himself the pleasure of calling on him on the following day. The other letter was from Dr. Eustace, inviting Aspen to favour him with a visit some afternoon at his convenience, as he much desired his opinion upon an etching he had just made at Teddington; and he was still more anxious to have ocular proof of the improvement in his health, respecting which he had received the most satisfactory information from Mrs. Beaver

and Sister Hester, both of whom had, it seemed, met him somewhere in the neighbourhood of Flinders, and who had so much to say about him that was interesting, though Mrs. Beaver had animadverted strongly, and with perfect justice, upon his habit of tramping the wet fields without his goloshes! Graham replied that, beyond his personal feelings of respect and esteem, which alone would urge him to respond at once to his kind invitation, his admiration for his original and eminent skill with the etching-point prompted him to fix an early day, which he named, and to which he looked forward with pleasurable anticipations.

And Aspen, in employing the phrase 'respect and esteem,' employed it in no sense conventionally. He had been deeply penetrated by the genuine, unbounded and disinterested goodness shown him by both Dr. Eustace and Alderman Clive, and which had awakened in his own breast a readiness to view human nature in a kindlier and more appreciative spirit than had latterly been his habit, isolated as he had become within the narrow boundary of 'self' from his enforced solitude and the burden of the suffering

flesh. The world, since this new and genial intimacy, had grown sunnier, and fellowship seemed not only possible but necessary to healthful existence. So infectious is human kindness; so blest an epidemic may charity be!

There was another allusion in the physician's note which thrilled Aspen with unwonted pleasure. It was the passage stating that Mrs. Beaver and Sister Hester had felt an interest in him. Strange transformation of character! He, the anchorite, the recluse, the man who had hitherto felt as an alien for whom the world had no care, had grown under the fostering warmth of example to yearn for human sympathy! That these women, or rather that one of them, had carried away a pleasurable remembrance of him was a sweet thing to meditate upon. Yesterday he had endeavoured to banish Sister Hester from his thoughts; to-day he felt that he was privileged to remember her as a friend,—a friend, to be sure, whom there was no reasonable probability of his meeting again, but she might nevertheless be reckoned as one added to that unique list of friends which comprised Mr. Clive, Dr. Eustace, and Jem.

The following morning, while Aspen was engaged upon his dead tree, Mrs. Starkie, opening the door, announced a gentleman, at the same time handing him a card bearing the superscription—Messieurs Glare and Gooley. The frequently-recurring arrival of carriages and cabs at her door since Jem had entered into artistic relationship with her lodger seemed to point to an improvement in Aspen's fortunes, and she began to admit that, after all, 'messing with those nasty paints' was not altogether unproductive of advantage to Jem; and as she was before all things a good mother, and, next to that, a conscientious landlady, she had, in the solitude of her back-parlour,—now no longer defaced by Jem's experimental performances with pencils and pigments,—conceived the truly great idea of laying a sacrifice on the altar of maternal affection, and with that view was in the act of counting out twenty-five sovereigns, the fruit of long years of thrift and self-denial, when Mr. Gooley, of the firm of Glare and Gooley, arrived.

‘So glad, Mr. Aspen, to find you at home, and painting, too! I consider myself most

fortunate. Not having been favoured with an inspection of anything more from your skilful hand, we began to think you must have gone abroad or taken up some other branch of art. Ah, another of your incomparable studies of trees! May we look at it?’

Graham replied by an assenting inclination of the head. Glare and Gooley, in the person of Mr. Gooley, advanced and sat down before the easel and remained absorbed for several minutes in its examination.

‘We should be glad to have it, Mr. Aspen,’ he said, rising from his chair and preparing to make a memorandum in his pocket-book, as though the bargain was virtually completed. ‘What is the price?’

‘I am not going to part with it,’ quietly replied Graham. ‘I intend to keep it.’

Glare and Gooley, in the person of Mr. Gooley, looked amazed. The abode of the artist, which is usually indicative of pecuniary status and worldly condition in general, did not appear to him to justify such abstinence from profitable negotiations.

‘It’s a pity,’ he said, with an impatient jerk

of the head which seemed to imply, ‘you artists are an impracticable tribe;’ and his eye, glancing round the room, fell on Jem’s painting of the studio in which he sat.

‘Excellent!’ he exclaimed; ‘admirable: and quite another style of art. Interiors are always popular, and we rarely meet with anything so forcible, Rembrandtish, and in every way original as this. I like it even better than the other one,’ pointing to the dead tree.

‘It is superior to it,’ rejoined Aspen, with sincerity.

‘I think I never saw armour put in so judiciously; and the lady sitting for her portrait—what a sweet face! Why, surely it must be the lady who was so deeply impressed by the beauty of the “Queen of the Glen,” when she and Miss Clive came with the alderman to purchase it?’

‘It was Alderman Clive who bought it?’

‘Yes; he had the original sketch photographed and sent round to all the trade. He couldn’t rest till he found—but perhaps we oughtn’t to mention these things, as he does not appear to have done so?’ continued Glare

and Gooley, in the person of Gooley, abruptly breaking off, conscious of neglecting a discreet trade reserve.

‘No; if Mr. Clive had wished it to transpire, he would have acquainted me with the fact when he visited me.’

‘Ah! Mr. Clive has paid you a visit?’ inquired Glare and Gooley in surprise, not unmingled with annoyance.

‘Several,’ was Aspen’s laconic reply, as the noble beneficence of the good man was thus unexpectedly revealed to him.

‘To return to this admirable interior, Mr. Aspen, is it sold?’

‘No.’

‘Then we may secure it?’ continued Glare and Gooley, in the person of Gooley, who had in his eye a Manchester client who had built a gallery at their recommendation, and took whatever they sent him.

‘Yes.’

‘And the price?’ he asked, carelessly, opening his memorandum-book to make a note of the transaction.

‘Forty guineas,’ replied Aspen, suppressing

the delight he felt in being able to do his friend Jem a service.

‘Thank you. We will pay that price with pleasure.’ Then, glancing again at the painting and failing to discover Aspen’s name upon it, he continued: ‘You will not object to sign it?’

‘I am not the painter. It is by Jem Starkie, who shares my studio.’

‘Jem Starkie? We don’t think we know that name,’ replied Messrs Glare and Gooley, in the person of Gooley, a good deal disconcerted, pondering on the entry rather hastily made in his memorandum-book.

‘Possibly not. But Mr. Starkie will have no objection to sign it.’

‘I dare say. But, when we proposed to purchase it, we concluded, finding it in Mr. Aspen’s studio, that it was by Mr. Aspen.’

‘That may be,’ retorted Graham, brusquely, ‘but, as you have justly remarked, the picture is Rembrandtish and far superior to my poor dead tree, it must be immaterial who painted it. A good thing is a good thing, and its value is just its own intrinsic worth.’

‘Very happily put, Mr. Aspen; but in our trade it is not quite so immaterial, and we have to remember that business is business, you know,’ argued Glare and Gooley: ‘the public is so absurdly prejudiced in favour of a name. I believe if John Smith of Whitechapel, let us say, painted the “Transfiguration,” that masterpiece of Raffael wouldn’t be looked at till John Smith had made a name. Now, with “Graham Aspen” at the corner of a picture, we could place it at once, but with Jem What’s-his-name written there, it might remain on our hands for years.’

‘Consequently, you cancel the bargain just now made, and entered in your note-book?’

‘Not altogether. But I fear the picture is not worth more than ten pounds to our firm.’

Graham calmly and quietly opened the studio-door to its full extent, and turning to Glare and Gooley, in the person of Gooley, he said,

‘I will not detain you longer, sir; I am, as you perceived when you entered the room, busy, and bread is not to be earned by fruitless talk.’

‘But, my dear sir,’ remonstrated Glare and

Gooley, discomfited, 'our first transaction was so satisfactory——'

'Yes, doubtless,' interrupted Graham, with rising spirit, 'our first transaction will also be our last. I wish you good-morning, Mr. Gooley.'

Messieurs Glare and Gooley, staggered but not silenced, resumed :

'On second thoughts, we will take it at the price you named, and I will, if you please, draw a——'

'On behalf of Mr. Starkie, I decline your offer. On his account and on my own I decline all transactions with a firm which deals in names and not in works.'

Aspen's rejoinder was enunciated so imperiously, there was such dignity and stern pride in his bearing, that Glare and Gooley, hat in hand, crest-fallen and disappointed, shuffled out of the room, muttering apologies; and as the door was quietly but decidedly closed behind the firm, they, in the person of Gooley, inveighed bitterly against their own lack of tact and foresight in alienating at once the painter of the 'Queen of the Glen,' which had brought them

the respectable profit of a hundred and fifty per cent., and an artist as yet unknown to fame, but whose work was not unworthy of Rembrandt, and whom it would have been well worth the firm's while to secure.

When Jem returned, Graham informed him that a dealer had called, and seeing his 'interior' had consented to purchase it at forty guineas.

Jem's transports of delight took the usual form, and he danced round the room.

'Forty guineas!' he cried, incredulous of his auditory faculties. 'Forty guineas?'

'Yes; and I refused it.'

'Refused forty guineas?'

'I declined to let the dealer have it at any price.'

Jem's saltatory exercise sustained a severe reaction. He sank into a chair in astonishment and dismay.

'I fear, my dear Jem, that my stubborn and unreasoning pride has stood in the way of your interests. I hope you will forgive me, but I could not stand this huckster's way of setting a value on a work of art. You have produced

what everyone must call a fine picture, but as you cannot produce what this dealer values still more, that is to say, "a name," your picture loses half its beauty, and nearly all its market value. This being nakedly and unblushingly stated by the dealer, as a reason for lowering the price I put upon it as fair and reasonable, forced me to show him the door.'

Jem's faith in the wisdom of his friend and master had never wavered: it was as absolute as his confidence in his art, and the effect of the stunning blow his feelings had received had passed off before Aspen's explanatory speech was concluded.

'Everything you say, like everything you do, Mr. Aspen, is a lesson to me, and I know, if I follow your lead, I shan't be far wrong.'

'My dear boy,' replied Graham, interrupting Jem's too appreciative rejoinder, 'you have only to follow your own healthy instincts and exercise the art-power that is in you, and you will be a better man and a greater painter than ever I can make you.'

Jem was not to be silenced where he felt strongly, and he resumed:

‘I have never forgotten that you once destroyed a painting of yours as a lesson to me to consider nothing done that was not both well done and completely done. And now you have shown me that an artist should be not only conscientious but also independent, and that his work should stand on its merits alone.’

‘Right or wrong, Jem, that has always been a rule with me,’ replied Graham, laying a brotherly hand on Jem’s shoulder, feeling proud of his friend’s estimate of him; ‘and it is surely well to keep in view a guiding principle in one’s life no less than in one’s art.’

The dialogue between the two friends was interrupted by Mrs. Starkie, who entered the room with a tray containing luncheon. Since the association of Jem with her lodger, she had constituted herself Aspen’s mother as well as Jem’s, so far as creature comforts were concerned, and this arrangement, judiciously initiated and placed on a permanent footing by Dr. Eustace and Alderman Clive, was manifestly to the advantage of Aspen, who had hitherto studiously neglected his first natural duty—self-preservation.

Mrs. Starkie bustled about doing nothing particular, and doing it so effectually that neither Aspen nor Jem noticed the maternal glances, the speechless expressions of affection which were addressed by her to her son, evidence of a desire to give utterance to some sentiment with which her bosom swelled, but which hung fire from excess of joy. The eloquent dumb-show at length attracted Aspen's attention from the fact that silence was not Mrs. Starkie's prevailing characteristic, and turning to her curiously he saw the radiant smile which played upon her face as she ogled her son.

'You seem in a happy frame of mind, Mrs. Starkie,' exclaimed Graham, rallying the worthy woman, 'surely something good has happened, eh?'

'Ah, Mr. Aspen, if I waited for the good things of this world, it would be a long time before I smiled; so do you know what I do?'

'No, really I do not.'

'I find my happiness in my thoughts.'

'Well, then, I can only say, Mrs. Starkie, that

you are as good a philosopher as you are excellent a cook, for one's thoughts are the best of all sources of happiness,' replied Graham, with admiration. 'And may I ask what has occupied your thoughts with such enviable results?'

'I've been thinking about my Jem.'

'Bravo! You can't think too much or too well of Jem,' said Graham, enthusiastically.

'That's just what I have come to feel, sir. Jem's all I have to care for; he's all I've got—and he's all I want;' and Mrs. Starkie stroked her son's head, in evidence of the pride and affection she had hitherto concealed from view with Spartan resolution; 'and, if I've been hard with the dear boy about that box of paints he bought with the sovereign his uncle gave him, it was only because I couldn't keep a clean towel or a table-cloth, and as for his pocket-handkerchiefs, they were in that mess, Mr. Aspen, that I had to boil 'em and boil 'em again, and I couldn't, for the life of me, get out the stains.'

'That dreadful macguilp!' interposed Aspen, highly amused.

‘So you will believe me when I say it was all for Jem’s good that I rated him.’

‘I’m quite sure of that, Mrs. Starkie, and Jem knows it too.’

‘But now I hear people talking about the dear boy’s cleverness,—his skies and his clouds, his pictures of the country, and all that,—I see I was wrong in being angry with him about his everlasting paintings and drawings, and Jem was right. He did it because he could no more help drawing than a duck can help swimming, and I ought to have seen it, I ought!’ and Mrs. Starkie wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron.

‘You both did what Nature prompted you to do, and therefore neither of you did the wrong thing,’ said Graham, in comforting accents. ‘Besides, Jem is overwhelmed with his emotions at your gracious words.’

(The fact was, Jem was as red as a peony with the effort to suppress the laughter which convulsed him.)

‘But words, Mr. Aspen, are nothing without deeds; and I’ve determined that Jem shall see that his mother feels for him, and feels in the right place!’ and Mrs. Starkie thereupon felt in

her pocket, and drew from that comprehensive receptacle a leather bag of coin. 'This little nest-egg, which I put by for a rainy day, I've made up my mind to give Jem now, and he may spend it in paint and brushes, and whatever he likes;' and the kind-hearted woman placed the bag in her astonished son's hands, saying, 'Jem, my darling, there's twenty-five sovereigns, and, if you want more, when that's gone, tell your mother, and she will see what she can find in her old stocking. Give me a kiss for it!' and Mrs. Starkie held out her arms for Jem to fall into them, when Aspen interposed by stepping between the mother and the son. If Mrs. Starkie thought that her lodger's object was to intercept the kiss in its passage, and appropriate it, she was speedily reassured:

'Before you give Jem the kiss,—which he will know how to return with interest,—allow me to have a voice in the transaction,' said Aspen, while Jem and his mother awaited, with a puzzled mien, his explanations. 'Jem has become a man of business, Mrs. Starkie,' began Graham, with mock gravity; 'he has just broken off a transaction with a dealer, because,

in our opinion, his terms were not satisfactory. Now, your proposal seems to Jem to err equally in the opposite direction. You offer Jem twenty-five pounds for a kiss, which Jem thinks altogether out of proportion. Is it not so, Jem?

Jem grinned from ear to ear. He thought, in his innermost conscience, that twenty-five pounds was an excellent price to pay for a kiss. Surely Mr. Aspen was not going to raise it to fifty?

‘Yes, I see I am expressing Jem’s views exactly,’ continued Graham, turning to Mrs. Starkie, who sat with her hands in her lap, just a trifle confused; ‘and he positively refuses to—to—— It is so, Jem, is it not?’

Jem felt idiotic, and incapable of a lucid answer. He could only obey his instinct, sitting, as he was, at the feet of his Gamaliel, and stammer a vacant ‘Yes.’

‘He refuses to give kisses for any other commodity than kisses, and on those terms he is prepared to deal with you liberally. But, if you hand him so solid an article as twenty-five pounds, Jem insists upon giving you value for your money, and, as he has only one article at

present in stock at all equivalent (though he has an inexhaustible mine, as yet undeveloped, in his brains and hands), he has decided to let you have, in exchange for your handsome tender, this serious and well-composed painting. Mrs. Starkie, I congratulate you. You are Jem's first patron, as you ought to be. You possess Jem's first really good picture, as you ought to do. And Jem has made a fair bargain; the picture is worth the money, though Jem asked the dealer forty guineas for it, knowing the habit of the tribe to abate; and Jem's first patron has made a fair bargain too, for in ten years time that picture will fetch ten times the amount paid for it at Christie's. Now, Jem, you may give your mother the kiss which I interrupted, and don't let your mother be a loser by the delay.'

And Aspen had the gratification of witnessing the homely pathos of a tender and earnest embrace of a mother and her son, and he remembered the joy which he himself was wont to feel in his far-off childhood, when he was folded in the arms of that loving one, now in Heaven, whose voice and face were to this day

the one central spirit of his happiest reveries.

Mrs. Starkie burst into tears as Jem took his 'interior' from the easel and handed it to her, saying,

'Mother, if I feel grateful to Mr. Aspen for this happy suggestion, how much more gratitude do I not owe you for your loving care and patience all these years! and it will always please me to recollect that, added to all your goodness to me, you were my first patron.'

Unquestionably, Aspen the ascetic had discovered the secret of dispensing and experiencing happiness.

CHAPTER IX.

HISTORY AND HISTORY.

THE day named by Aspen for his visit to Dr. Eustace arrived, and the physician received him in his 'den,' a room which a more pretentious amateur would call his atelier, with remarkable cordiality. The room, if compared with his other well-arranged and symmetrical apartments, was very fitly styled a den, for about it were scattered in artistic disorder the utensils and materials of the craft he affected,—copper-plates, reflectors, shades, etching tools, acids, wax, varnish, hot plate and proofs taken at progressive stages of the 'biting-in,' while the walls were adorned with prints of the great masters of the art, from Rembrandt to Landseer.

Placing his visitor in a chair, Dr. Eustace said,

‘Before we talk art or history (for I have history as well as art to discuss with you), let us see where we are in the far more important matter of health. Would you mind stripping?’

By way of reply, Aspen threw off his clothing and presented his chest to the physician, who at once noted a remarkable improvement in his condition.

‘Why, my dear sir, you are not the same man you were! Flabbiness gone; flesh firm; skin tense and healthy; action of the heart strong and regular, and weight—just sit on these scales a moment—ah! weight increased,—ten stone—nay, eleven stone within a pound! Why, my dear Mr. Aspen, what have you been doing to bring about this metamorphosis?’

Aspen could not fail to be amused and even touched by the physician’s evident delight in his improved condition; he replied modestly, but without hesitation,

‘I have been eating and drinking the good things ordered by you in conjunction with Mr. Clive.’

‘I must commend your obedience. I do not find all my patients equally submissive;’ and the physician applied the stethoscope to breast and back and examined the respiratory organs exhaustively.

‘Positively normal!’ he ejaculated, with unaffected pleasure; ‘you put me to shame, for I must confess that, when I examined you a twelvemonth ago, I formed an opinion not altogether hopeful.’

‘You gave me three years,’ ventured Aspen, somewhat sorrowfully.

‘I did, and I thought that period more than I was justified in prognosticating, considering your condition. But, if you continue to recuperate as you have done, I don’t see why you should ever die!’ and the kindly physician laughed at the handsome amends he was now making for his shabby treatment of his patient on the occasion referred to. ‘I fear I took your own estimate of your case when you first consulted me,’ he continued. ‘It was not a hopeful one. I should imagine that physical existence is not so burdensome to you as it was?’

‘Many interests make my life now a happier one.’

‘And health enables you to maintain those interests. Ah, sir, there’s no possession comparable to health,—health which we squander away like reckless gamblers, but which no change of luck can win back again! But to return to your case. In referring to my notes I find my opinion in a great measure influenced by the history you gave me of your family. Those data are very important to us in diagnosing, and you unintentionally misled me.’

‘How so? I believe I correctly described the nature of the diseases which carried off my people.’

‘Undoubtedly you believed so; but it affords me immense satisfaction to find that your information on this vital point was singularly inexact.’

‘Inexact?’

‘In every particular. Not one feature of the cases, as you related them, was correct.’

Aspen, still confident, shook his head, incredulous of the physician’s assertion, for he remem-

bered that the facts were of common notoriety and comment when he was a boy.

‘You stated that your parents and brother and sister all fell a prey to consumption?’

‘Yes.’

‘And your authority for that statement was, probably, rumour.’

‘Everybody knew it.’

‘Is that all? I generally find that what everybody knows no one knows, for they will all differ in their knowledge of the facts, for the reason that each individual in imparting the story adds a little garnish on his own account. Now, it is with me a point of professional duty never to accept hearsay evidence as final. I must have it established by irrefutable proof. And I feel sure that, when I produce that proof to you, you will abandon the belief you have nursed from boyhood on the faith of gossip.’

‘I hope I shall always be open to conviction whenever I am wrong,’ replied Aspen, still confident of his own accuracy.

‘For personal, no less than for professional reasons, I desired to confirm or remove my

suspicious, and, having an old friend and fellow-student practising in Bombay, I wrote out to him shortly after our first interview, giving him such information as I had gathered from you, and instructing him to have made a careful examination among the records as to the causes of death of each member of your family. The long interval since I wrote has not been wasted. I have just received from him an exhaustive report on all points, and I hope that the facts I have in store for you will be as grateful to you as they are to me.'

Aspen, who had by this time resumed his habiliments, signified by his earnest and pleased expression that he appreciated the physician's extreme goodness in making investigations in his interest.

'This is the substance of the report,' continued Dr. Eustace, opening the document. 'Your father, Theodore Aspen, civil engineer, died at Hyderabad on the 5th of September, 1865, of aneurism of the aorta, brought on by over-exertion in the construction of a bridge at that place. His age was forty-five. Mildred Aspen, relict of the above-named, died at Bombay, on

the 13th of June, 1867, of diphtheria, aged thirty-eight. Since the death of her husband, she had suffered with melancholia, following an attack of rheumatic fever. Jeffrey Aspen, son of Theodore Aspen, died October 4th, 1867, of inflammation of the lungs, brought on by exposure in thin clothing on a cold night. He was sixteen years of age. Celia Aspen, daughter of Theodore Aspen, died at Bombay, December 1st, 1867, aged fifteen years. Her disease was obscure, but the liver was enlarged and the digestive organs impaired. There were, moreover, latent tubercles on the lungs, but this had no connection with her death. These extracts,' continued Dr. Eustace, handing the document to Aspen, 'are duly attested, and are therefore absolutely reliable. Do you accept them as such?'

'Dear sir,' replied Graham, with a deep breath, as though a life-long burden had been lifted from his mind, 'how shall I sufficiently express my grateful sense of your wonderful kindness to me in every way? I accept it as another benefit received at your hands, the latest and perhaps the greatest.'

‘My investigations did not cease at this point. They took another direction,’ continued Dr. Eustace, gazing with earnestness in Aspen’s face.

‘I am quite at a loss to conceive why you should take such trouble on my account, Dr. Eustace.’

‘If you remember, I told you, when you first consulted me, that I felt a great interest in you, and I added that some day I would tell you the reason.’

‘I recollect it distinctly, for it struck me as so improbable that I’m ashamed to say I viewed it as an idle remark.’

‘I hope I don’t often make idle remarks,’ rejoined the physician, with good humour, ‘and the time has arrived for me to justify that speech. I think you told me you are without a living relative?’

‘It is so. I have survived them all.’

‘Your parents had neither sisters nor brothers?’

‘I never heard of any.’

‘Sad. I can well conceive that, to a man of your nature, the possession of relations, even remote, would have been a source of happiness.’

‘The absence of any such bond has, I own, embittered my life,’ replied Graham, with a decision that showed that he spoke as he felt.

‘Do you know,’ resumed Dr. Eustace, ‘that our lots in this particular are identical. I am in the same position as yourself as regards kith and kin.’

‘Indeed?’

‘Would it interest you to hear my family history?’

‘Greatly.’

‘My father was in the navy, and fell a victim to yellow fever on the Gold Coast in the year 1840, when I was twenty-two years of age.’

‘Pardon my interrupting you,’ said Aspen, with an energy which rather startled the physician, ‘but I already find an extraordinary analogy between our histories. That is precisely the date and the circumstances of my grandfather’s death, who was, like your father, in the Royal Navy.’

‘Singular,’ was Dr. Eustace’s reply, as he continued: ‘My mother was left with two children, myself and a daughter, fourteen years of age, but the shock of my father’s death was

so crushing that within a few weeks we were orphans. I was thus early left the sole protector of that young girl, and I did my best to discharge the duties which had devolved upon me. My sister was remarkably beautiful, and that, unhappily, led to a severance, and my guardianship lasted barely three years, for Mildred (that was her name) formed an attachment.' Dr. Eustace glanced at Aspen, who seemed to grow nervous and agitated as he proceeded: 'And the attachment was one which I, as her guardian, did not approve. But Mildred had always been humoured, as beautiful girls are wont to be, and, beyond her fair face (I see it now! pure in form, brilliant in complexion), she was gifted with a singularly sweet voice which captivated all hearers, and that tended to make her wilful. She disregarded my protests and married, in spite of me, a Captain Sinclair.'

The physician again glanced at Aspen, whose agitation became almost painful.

'Captain Sinclair, unwilling to meet me, compelled Mildred to terminate all intercourse with me, and he took her to Calcutta, where he

joined his regiment. It was a great grief to me, for I loved my sister tenderly—ay, tenderly as a father,—and I endeavoured to re-open the intimacy; but I suppose Mildred was never allowed to reply to my letters, for she never wrote, and thus we became lost to one another. I heard, incidentally, that Sinclair died of dysentery, and I wrote to Mildred, but either my letter miscarried or she resolved to maintain her husband's injunctions, for no answer ever reached me.'

Dr. Eustace kept an observant eye on his visitor, and, accurately divining the intensity of his feelings, remained silent to afford him an opportunity of comment.

And Graham's attention was, in fact, too much concentrated on his own thoughts and on a startling conviction which burst upon him to heed further speech at present. He already began to view Dr. Eustace with different feelings. There was a change in their positions. Hitherto he had been to him a most valued and respected medical adviser and friend, who had, moreover, a title to his esteem as an artist of no mean power. But now there burst upon

his imagination the possibility of a relationship which had only existed in his dreams. Like a vital force for long years pent up and numbed, like a living organism touched by the genial warmth of spring and aroused from hybernation, this new hope quivered into activity; the craving of an isolated heart for the accordant thrill of kinship already caught a sympathetic response. Either he was in presence of the most extraordinary coincidence conceivable, or his mother's brother (of whom he had never heard) stood before him. Graham felt the momentousness of the crisis—it might influence his life. Should the flattering hope prove fallacious, he could hardly find fortitude to bear up against the disappointment. If, on the other hand, his surmise should be justified, who could foresee the effect upon a nature which had hitherto shrunk, hermit-like, into itself for lack of that congenial love which is born of affinity? The point must be cleared up at once; he could not endure suspense. Stirring himself as for an encounter, bracing himself for a great effort, he said, turning to the physican, who was accurately following the course of his reflections :

‘I believe it is in my power to take up the history of your sister where it escaped you and passed into the unknown.’

‘Is it possible?’ responded Dr. Eustace, feigning surprise ; for he had, as we know, long since conjectured that the young artist was no other than Mildred’s son, but he desired that Graham should have the pleasure of the discovery. ‘Is it really possible?’

‘Your sister Mildred married again, and by her second husband she had two sons and a daughter, of whom only one survives ; she has been dead many years.’

‘Ah!’

‘Yes ; and the name of her second husband was—’ (Dr. Eustace could hear the beating of Graham’s heart)—‘was Aspen. The surviving son is named Graham.’

The revelation was made, the claim put forward, the challenge accepted. Would Dr. Eustace respond loyally, generously, joyfully, as Graham hoped? It was a moment of exquisite suspense for the young man, but it was only a moment. The physician held out a hand, which Graham grasped eagerly.

‘The discovery you have made, Graham, was a suspicion in my mind the first time we met. Later on, the suspicion became a moral conviction, and the conviction received confirmation when my letters arrived from Bombay. We have each become enriched—at least, I feel so—in the discovery of a kinsman sent, as it were, from the spirit-world.’

‘If your pleasure is great,’ replied Graham, much moved, ‘my joy is overwhelming. Happiness comes upon me too fast! A year ago I was alone and aloof from all fellowship. Then my faithful friend Jem crossed my path, and I had hardly taken him to my heart when Mr. Clive and you descended upon me as emissaries from Heaven itself, to humanise me and show me what goodness there is after all in man; and now, to crown all these surprises, I find myself possessor of the one thing I desired, but which Destiny seemed to have denied me, a surviving relative.’

Dr. Eustace was more than gratified at the reciprocity of sentiment shown by Graham in this speech, and, in proof of his satisfaction, he at once took him into his confidence :

‘I have made myself acquainted with your history and present circumstances, Graham, and, that I may not have an advantage, it is reasonable you should be told, as a member of the family, more about me.’

‘Dear sir,’ replied Graham, modestly, ‘greatly as everything concerning you will interest me, I have no curiosity whatever as regards your more personal affairs.’

‘I am quite sure of that. But I think it will serve to cement the friendship which will, I hope, ripen into a sentiment conducing to the happiness of both of us if I tell you that, after a long life devoted to science, supplemented by my recreations in art in leisure hours, I find myself in a position which the world calls affluent. Now I have lived long enough to know the secret of enjoying that which all men covet—wealth, namely, its just employment, and, as Science and Art can both alike claim me as their devotee, it is and has long been my desire to apply my otherwise unprofitable accumulation in promoting the interests of each. As regards the cause of Science, I see my way pretty clearly; it is my proper domain. But, as to Art, I

am but as a child on the sea-shore, snatching a fearful joy in the margin of the waters into which he has no strength to plunge. Your advent, my dear Graham, is most opportune, and I shall ask you to give me the benefit of your knowledge, so that, while unable myself to take a position in the honourable brotherhood of artists to which you belong, I may yet assist recruits to join the ranks, and thus help forward the art-power which lies dormant in this country, needing only a fostering hand to give it activity. But this we can discuss later on. I will only say now that, if anything suggests itself to you in which my purse can be made available in the cause I have indicated, I shall esteem it a favour if you call upon me to make good my professions. Can I do anything for your estimable companion, Jem ?

‘In a pecuniary way, no,’ replied Graham, gently and appreciatively. ‘Jem prefers to enjoy the fruits of labour. He feels that, to be an artist, he must preserve that independence which belongs to those who earn the bread they eat. Jem would feel humiliated by any

offer of assistance, however kindly and gracefully made.'

'Ah! I recognise there the wholesome teaching, the manly spirit of Jem's master,' exclaimed Dr. Eustace, with admiration; 'and if I mistake not he will be a worthy pupil in art as in morals. When I asked the question, I meant it to apply to Jem's paintings. I should like to possess that admirable "interior," if he could part with it.'

'It is already sold.'

'Really? Who is the fortunate purchaser?'

'His mother, Mrs. Starkie.'

Dr. Eustace could hardly conceal the amusement which the information afforded him, but he hastened to recognise the propriety of a transaction by which a mother enjoyed the first-fruits of her child's genius.

'There again I believe I see the controlling hand of Jem's master and friend,' he replied, looking at Aspen with an approving smile; 'but when the claims of maternity are quite satisfied perhaps I may hope to secure a bit of Jem's. In the meantime, my dear Graham, I have a still

greater demand to make upon you. As you may know, I have never married, have never tasted the joys of fatherhood, but I think I should be near to that experience if you would consider that you have a home here whenever leisure permits and inclination leads your steps to my door. And remember, Graham, I am not offering you a refuge or conferring a benefit; I ask this of you as a favour, as a pleasure, as a source of happiness to myself!

The two men, the uncle and the nephew, closed hands in a cordial grip which had loyalty and affection in it. Neither spoke; Aspen's heart was moved to its depths with gratitude, while Dr. Eustace felt so flushed with unaccustomed joy that speech was for the moment impossible, and he hastily withdrew to an inner room to indulge in the rare luxury of tears.

The next day Graham revisited Savile Row, conveying thither with excessive care a picture wrapped in a covering, and which he placed on a chair in his uncle's den. When Dr. Eustace, who was absent, returned, he found a letter thus worded:

‘ You have already discovered in my ideal the

face of your sister Mildred, my beloved mother, painted from the image of her in my heart under the spell of a voice which recalled hers. The study which I refused to sell to you as a stranger, I feel both pride and pleasure in offering for your acceptance, not only as my mother's brother, but also in recognition of your great goodness to me. You will, I am sure, value it not only in memory of her whose features it recalls, but also of her son, should your first estimate of the span of life in store for him prove prophetic !'

CHAPTER X.

THE 'AT HOME.'

'THAT'S capital!' cried Ethel Clive, as she and Lena concluded the duet they had been assiduously rehearsing in preparation for a musical 'at home' for which Ethel had issued invitations; 'grand! Why, it will bring down the house, Lena, and Herr Stomper will simply go frantic with delight!'

Lena smiled at her friend's enthusiasm, though she did not share it. To gratify Ethel, whom she loved as a sister, she had persevered with extraordinary zeal, and had so mastered the nice fingering of the violin as to justify the expectation so hopefully entertained by her companion and the pride evinced by her master.

Had she followed the dictates of nature, she would have laid the instrument aside for awhile, if not altogether, notwithstanding her devotion to the art, for it involved a strain upon her mental and physical powers which at times she felt hardly able to bear. Every serious effort now made in study was followed by prostration. Lassitude was the penalty of exertion; but for Ethel's sake the penalty was freely paid; for Ethel's sake the prostration was concealed. It is true the keen eye of Mr. Clive detected with the anxiety of a father the lessening roundness of contour and lustre of complexion; but Lena always met his inquiries with a cheerful and reassuring response, until he believed his apprehensions were groundless. Dr. Eustace, when visiting the house, had not failed to note unsatisfactory symptoms, and he had given her friendly cautions as to clothing, diet, rest, exposure to certain conditions of atmosphere, and exercise. But Lena, regardless of self, entered keenly into all Ethel's projects, joining in her expeditions and assisting in her gaieties at the inevitable price of a further forfeiture of her waning strength.

The concert had been arranged by Mr. Clive and Ethel, partly to afford Lena some diversion and partly to gratify many friends with an exhibition of the great progress the girls had made with the difficult instrument they had taken up. Among the invited guests were the Herr, of course, Mrs. and Miss Tierney, Dr. Eustace, Aspen, and Jem Starkie, and the entertainment was looked forward to with great interest, though Lena in her heart dreaded an ordeal which she felt would tax her scant store of strength grievously. Mr. Clive, too, was not altogether free from anxiety. He had marked a failure of energy which the young girl, to avoid giving pain to her friends, had endeavoured to conceal, and he at one moment suggested that the proposed gathering should be adjourned on Lena's account; but Ethel had set her heart upon it, and Lena, with her habitual devotion, could see no reason for postponement, and gave her vigorous support to Ethel's wish for the arrangement to stand. Mr. Clive, therefore, gave way.

Graham Aspen and Jem drove to Regent's Park with Dr. Eustace, and when they arrived

the company were assembled and the brilliantly-lighted rooms were thronged. At the end of the drawing-room was raised a daïs on which were arranged the pianoforte and other needful accessories for the use of the performers, one of whom was in evidence, the concert having already commenced. The gentleman, Mr. Vamp, was reciting the tragic episode of a shipwreck as narrated by an ancient mariner who views it from the rock-bound coast. The tempest rages ; the thunders crash ; the billows foam ; the timbers creak, and the riven sails are carried away. The gifted Mr. Vamp unfolds the dire catastrophe with increasing vehemence. With his raven locks thrown back, his eyes rolling in fine frenzy, his voice hoarse in its vain contest with the howling winds, the ancient mariner simulates the shouts of the officers and cries of the doomed crew as an avalanche of water sweeps men and gear and cargo into the angry waves. The young ladies among the company sigh distressfully ; the elder ladies wipe their tearful eyes ; the wall-flowers purse their brows, envious of the dramatic power possessed by Mr. Vamp, as, with outstretched arms

and a wail of agony, the ancient mariner, descrying through the spray and the wreckage a fellow-creature battling with the merciless breakers, plunges from the rock into the foam and drags him to shore. More tears, more sighs, more envious frowns among the breathless auditory. The manner of the gifted Mr. Vamp now changed, for the ancient mariner tells, in accents of tender emotion, how he carries the moribund sailor to his cabin and chafes him back to life, and how, the tempest being spent and the fury of the winds abated, he leads the resuscitated youth from the dark cabin into the light of day, and, ah ! his features recall those of his only boy who was carried off by a press-gang and had died at Trafalgar, fighting his country's battles. The boy speaks ; his voice thrills the ancient mariner ; he gives his name—Zach ; the ancient mariner starts ; he says he had a father once ; the ancient mariner is now convinced. He confronts the young man, views him from his boots to his crown ; he recognises him by his blue eyes—so like his mother's !—and a tattoo-mark on his wrist. ‘ Yes, yes—it is—it is my long-lost son ! ’ and Mr. Vamp, with a low

obeisance in response to acclamations, retires from the stage. The old ladies dry their tears; the younger ones breathe freely again, and the wall-flowers caress their moustachios, each thankful for the happy anti-climax, and forgetting all about the captain, crew, and passengers in the ill-fated vessel who were not long-lost sons, with blue eyes—so like their mother's!—and who did not providentially return in a tempest to bless the latter days of ancient mariners.

Jem, who had never witnessed anything of the kind before, was amazingly struck with the performance, and made rapid and droll sketches on the back of his programme of Mr. Vamp, which he negligently threw aside, and which, falling into critical hands, were highly relished, being handed about among the envious wall-flowers, and even exhibited to Mr. Vamp himself, to the dismay of the peccant Jem, who, in the estimation of the envious wall-flowers, became as great a hero as the hero he had depicted, while by Mr. Vamp he was viewed with mortal hatred and contempt.

The next event in the programme was a

performance in dumb show by another amateur. 'I get my living by jugglery,' said a fair, agile gentleman, as he mounted the daïs, and, buttoning his coat across his chest and tying a silk handkerchief round his head, he was at once transformed into the mountebank he personated. He began by clearing a space among the spectators with an imaginary rope, and laid his hat on the ground for anticipated coppers. He then drew attention to his biceps, smote his broad chest, and gave evidence of the possession of herculean strength. He proceeded to lift from the ground an imaginary cannon-ball of at least ninety pounds, which he rolled with the greatest ease over his massive biceps, up and down his arm, round his shoulders on to the other biceps, and along his forearm to the tips of his fingers, when it fell to the ground with an imaginary crash as he proudly acknowledged the imaginary plaudits of the mob.

His next feat was an imaginary plate with an equally imaginary wand. Flinging the plate high in the air, he adroitly caught it on the point of his wand, and spun it round with extraordinary dexterity and velocity, resting the

wand now on his finger, now on his chin, and now in the corner of his eye, the whirling plate maintaining its speed. Once it seemed that a catastrophe was imminent,—the imaginary plate threatened to lose its equilibrium. It was an agonising moment for the juggler; his features became horribly contorted; he swayed hither and thither in the desperate effort to maintain the perpendicularity of the imaginary wand, in another moment it will be down!—but, no, with a supreme effort he recovers the upright position, the plate spins again merrily until the acrobat, removing the imaginary wand from its resting-place in the corner of his eye, terminates the difficult feat by lightly catching the imaginary plate in his hand, and, with his face radiant with pride and satisfaction, he bows in acknowledgment of the thundering applause (imaginary) of the populace. To perform the next and final act, he is obliged again to have recourse to the rope-end to drive back the encroaching mob. Taking up one by one several imaginary balls, they are played hand-over-hand with faultless precision, sometimes they are thrown up backwards or from under his legs and apparently in

hopeless confusion, but, wherever a ball is falling, there a hand is ready to receive it and return it into space ; the acrobat following its motion with unerring eyes. This successfully accomplished, he lays aside all the imaginary balls but one, and, tying round his forehead an imaginary cup, he flings the ball several hundred feet into the air, and focusses the imaginary cup to receive the falling ball. It was a moment of tremendous suspense ; if the ball should deviate an eighth of an inch from the exact centre the performer must inevitably lose an eye, if, indeed, he does not get his skull fractured. But no, he is infallible ! With a supposititious thud, the imaginary ball plumps into the imaginary cup, and the triumphant artist, radiant with his success, bows again and again in response to the imaginary acclamations of the multitude. The verisimilitude of the business is completed by the acrobat picking up his cap and handing it round for the coppers. And here Mr. Clive's guests showed such high appreciation of the amateur's personation that shillings and half-crowns were showered on to the daïs from all sides, whereupon the acrobat, snatching off his

fillet and turning down the lappets of his coat, reappeared in his normal character of a gentleman in evening-dress, and, gathering together the handsome proceeds of the contribution, he gracefully slid the coins into a collecting-box for charitable purposes which Miss Clive kept in a corner of the room, and regained his seat amid the plaudits (no longer imaginary) of the delighted company.

Jem, obeying an inveterate instinct, had made some spirited sketches on the back of a second programme, which was eagerly pounced upon by the wall-flowers, and so great was the competition for its possession that one of them conceived the brilliant idea of offering to purchase it :

‘Ha, haw, my dear fellar, take a sov. for it?’

‘Yes,’ said Jem, without hesitation ; and the luminous wall-flower handed Jem the coin which he felt no little pride in at once slipping into Ethel’s collecting-box.

Mr. Clive, making his way to Aspen, asked to be allowed to introduce him to Miss Lipperty, whose acquaintance he had already made, with

a view to his taking her down to the ices. The act on Mr. Clive's part was premeditated. He had noticed that, in his hours of professional occupation, Aspen had neglected those little amenities which are the lubricants of social life, and, as he felt sure that Lena found more than common pleasure in his society, he wished to afford him an opportunity of atoning for an apparent slight which he well knew was alone due to his absorption in his art.

Graham saluted Lena with the courtesy due both to his host and herself, and, offering his arm, performed the enviable function with perfect grace. The fact of partaking food together places persons on a common footing at once; familiarity is admitted, and conventionality laid aside; and Lena found in the conversation of the young artist all the charm with which her imagination had invested him. In withdrawing from the dining-room, the conservatory (illuminated with lanterns of many devices and fairy-lamps scattered among the plants) invited exploration, and Graham led the not unwilling girl into it. The soft plash of a fountain; the gurgling of a tiny waterfall over

masses of tuff, and among ferns and grasses; the cooing of doves, and the activity of birds in the aviary, all combined to lend enchantment to the fragrant retreat.

Placing Lena in a rustic chair, he took a seat by her side.

'I see, by the programme,' he said, looking into her face, 'that we are to be favoured with an example of your skill on the violin?'

'Yes,' replied Lena, 'Ethel and I are to play a duet. Mr. Clive wishes it, but I rather dread the ordeal.'

'Why so?'

'I don't know how I shall bear the presence of such a company.'

'I can quite understand that feeling. It is natural; it is becoming. But you must dismiss it. Forget that there are eyes and ears in the room. Concentrate every faculty on the score, —see nothing else; be conscious of nothing else, and you will be as secluded as in your own room.'

'It is excellent advice,' replied Lena, smiling, 'and I will endeavour to act upon it.'

'That is right. It is possible to isolate one's-

self in a crowd. It is a matter of resolution, and, unless I am greatly mistaken in you, you possess resolution in no common degree.'

Lena felt encouraged. The advice was grateful and opportune, and, coming from Aspen, sank deep. That brief interchange of thoughts, how fraught with happiness it seemed, as she dwelt upon it afterwards! The earnest, expressive eyes of the young artist fixed upon her in the soft light of that quiet seclusion, how they won her from all else! Too brief the joy! Too like the unreality of a dream was the momentary felicity!

'Are you fond of flowers?' he asked.

'Oh, yes,' she replied, dreamily.

Graham culled a white moss-rose.

'This is as beautiful as it is uncommon. May I present it to you?'

Lena's thanks were scarcely audible, but Graham might have heard the beating of her heart, as he offered his arm, and reconducted her to the saloon.

Herr Stomper was in great feather. A grand advertisement of his system was about to be presented. It was known that he turned out

nothing but phenomenons, and Fraulein Lip-perty, he assured everybody, 'surpass zem all.' Ethel was growing anxious at Lena's prolonged absence, as the moment was drawing near for their duet. A song of unusual excellence had drawn the company from other parts of the house, and the room was now thronged. Dr. Eustace, Aspen, and Jem were together, awaiting with anticipation the joint performance, as Mr. Clive led his daughter and Lena on to the daïs.

Ethel commenced. With confidence, delicacy, and skill, she ran over the opening bar up to the point where the second violin joins.

'Now you sall see!' whispered the Herr to those about him, his white waistcoat expanding with proud anticipation. 'Listen!' and, in the perfect silence, Lena drew the bow across the strings as Ethel paused. But, in place of the soft chord expected, a harsh, tentative sound grated on the ear. Ethel proceeded. Lena again plied the bow, and the curious audience listened for the masterful notes which were coming. Strange! the only audible sound was that evoked from Ethel's instrument, marred,

however, again and again by tuneless sounds from her companion's.

Lena's eyes were fixed on the score before her, but she saw nothing. She repeated to herself Aspen's advice to give herself up absolutely to her task; but, alas! Aspen's words, Aspen's earnest face haunted her; the glamour of those few moments in the conservatory dulled her senses to all else,—she was under a spell with which it was vain to contend—the soft voice, the plashing water, the cooing doves, the perfumed air had intoxicated her—she was lost. Ethel, with wonderful nerve, endeavoured to conceal the situation, and played vigorously, whispering, 'Lena! Lena!' But poor Lena was dazed. Her brain, enfeebled by a subtle and insidious disease, and over-wrought by too great devotion to study, failed her at the critical moment, and suddenly becoming conscious of the painful dilemma, and being overwhelmed with confusion, her arms fell to her sides, and had it not been for the prompt assistance of Mr. Clive, who was close at hand, the stricken violinist must have sunk to the floor.

The tragic catastrophe caused veritable consternation. Herr Stomper was beside himself. Aspen and Jem were paralysed. Dr. Eustace was instantly at Lena's side administering restoratives, and in a few minutes he was able to allay the anxiety of the company by stating that it was only a passing ailment, due in a great measure to the excitement of the occasion acting upon a nervous temperament.

The other performers judiciously aided in dissipating the disquietude which prevailed, and the concert proceeded, the only guest present who refused to be comforted being Herr Stomper, whose favourite phenomenon, on whom his hopes of a splendid advertisement of his system had rested, failed so grievously. Glees, madrigals and recitals, flute and harp, succeeded each other, until a song without accompaniment, by Miss Tierney, was reached.

Aspen was examining a folio of engravings with Dr. Eustace and Jem when Miss Tierney was led on to the daïs. As the first words of the song reached him he stood with suspended breath, and when he heard the fuller notes he started like one under magnetic influence,—

power of speech or action seemed gone from him. The song was old and familiar to everyone, but the voice of the singer was wonderfully sweet and tender. With rare modulation and pathos Miss Tierney thrilled the company with the simple air of 'Auld Robin Gray,' and, as she ceased, perfect stillness prevailed for a moment, and then a burst of applause rent the air. Aspen seemed unable to turn his eyes in the direction of the singer, so rapt he seemed, so strongly impressed.

'That voice!' he said to Dr. Eustace, 'did you recognise it? And the song.'

'It recalls Mildred's.'

'Yes, it is my mother's.'

'It is Sister Hester,' whispered Jem, leaning across to Graham; 'Sister Hester whom you painted by the dead tree.'

Graham turned at the announcement, and, to his surprise, recognised his sitter, as Jem had stated. He interrogated Dr. Eustace by a gesture.

'Miss Hester Tierney, daughter of an old friend and patient, has joined the nursing sisterhood,' rejoined the physician. 'It was

she whom you saw with Nurse Beaver at Flinders. She devotes herself to that noble service.'

'But the voice !' urged Graham, eagerly, 'the voice !'

'Is singularly sweet.'

'Had it not been for such a voice, singing that song—my mother's song,—at the instant of my great temptation, I should not have been a living man to-day.' After a few moments' reflection he resumed : 'Will you introduce me ? I must speak to that girl.'

Dr. Eustace, greatly surprised, acceded to Graham's request. His strange statement needed explanation. But this was neither the time nor the place to ask for it. Making his way to where Mrs. Tierney and Hester were sitting, he presented his nephew to them.

'Mr. Aspen is not quite a stranger to your daughter,' he said, after the formal introduction.

'No,' replied Mrs. Tierney, 'Hester has told me all about their interesting meeting in the neighbourhood of Flinders, where Beaver and she had been nursing at the death-bed of a sweet child.'

Graham was too well disciplined to give evidence of the strong feeling which stirred him, and fell, with the best grace possible, into conversation on the topics of the evening. He made no allusion to Hester's song.

'We were so pained,' said Mrs. Tierney, addressing Dr. Eustace, 'at poor Miss Lipperty's breakdown. Hester desired to go to her assistance, but as you and Miss Clive were there she felt her services were not needed.'

'Miss Lena needs only rest. To one of her sensibility the ordeal of this evening was, I must admit, greatly trying, though, had her health been satisfactory, she would, no doubt, have accomplished her task.'

'Poor girl, she looks ill.'

Dr. Eustace made no reply, but by his significant glance Mrs. Tierney understood that he took a serious view of Lena's case, and as she was much interested in her she thought it probable that the physician might enlighten her further in confidence; she therefore said:

'May I ask you, doctor, to take me down to a cup of coffee?'

The doctor offered ten thousand apologies

for his negligence in not soliciting the pleasure.

‘And I dare say Mr. Aspen will favour Hester by giving her his arm?’ she continued, turning to the young artist, who at that moment felt ready to make any sacrifice in the world for that very privilege.

‘I fear mamma is presuming upon your slight knowledge of me, Mr. Aspen,’ ventured Hester as they descended the stairs.

‘Your mamma must possess the power of divining one’s thoughts, for she has granted me a pleasure I scarcely dared to ask!’

Evidently it was Aspen’s fate that evening to make startling remarks. He had astonished Dr. Eustace a few minutes before. It was now Hester’s turn to be surprised. Surely he is not a man to deal in idle phrases and persiflage? she reflected. He is not a man to indulge in hollow compliments and meaningless professions?

‘But we are nearly strangers to one another,’ she contended, in tones of gentle rebuke which invited reply.

‘We are not quite such strangers as you imagine,’ was Aspen’s ambiguous answer, as they entered the dining-room. Another startling

assertion for Hester to cogitate upon as she sipped her coffee !

Aspen, whether by accident or design, subsequently led Miss Tierney towards the conservatory, the picturesqueness of which elicited her admiring exclamations.

‘ You would like to stroll round it ? ’ enquired Aspen.

‘ Very much indeed.’

Did Aspen feel a momentary qualm of conscience as he remembered the brief but agreeable *tête-à-tête* he had enjoyed with Lena barely an hour ago in the same spot ? Was he conscious of treachery to the maiden into whose rapt soul he had poured such earnest, cheering words at the moment of her misgiving ? Did he know that his courtesy and kindness had so filled her brain with a sweet delirium that disaster instead of success resulted ? No ; Graham had not the faintest idea of these things. He had acted as became a gallant cavalier, and Lena’s inexplicable failure pained him as it pained everyone else present. But now quite a different sentiment actuated him.

New, unsuspected activities stirred within him. His heart, which had seemed responsive to Sister Hester, leaned irresistibly towards Hester Tierney.

Aspen placed her in the seat occupied by Lena, in the leafy nook amid the soothing sounds of plashing water and cooing doves, and the soft light of lanterns and fairy lamps.

'I surprised you just now,' said Graham, taking a seat by Hester's side, 'by asserting, perhaps too abruptly and too confidently, that we are not quite such strangers to each other as you supposed.'

'I must own that I was rather surprised,' replied Hester, with humour.

'It was an assumption of mine based upon a conviction that, as there are no two faces identical, so there cannot be two voices quite the same. My dear mother had a most sweet voice, and one song in particular she sang with exquisite tenderness. A year or more ago I heard the same song in the New Forest sung by a voice wonderfully like my mother's. It reached me like a voice from the realm of spirits, recall-

ing me to reason at a moment of terrible temptation. It saved me! To-night I have heard a voice which I believe to be the same singing the same song, "Auld Robin Gray."

Hester enquired the date of his visit to the New Forest, which Graham gave accurately.

'It is the same voice,' replied Hester, deeply moved, as she remembered the corresponding date of her visit with her mother to that place.

'How visible is the controlling hand of Providence!' exclaimed Graham. 'If I tell you, Miss Tierney, that you have been an influence in my life from that hour to this, I shall hardly do you justice. You have been more. Unconsciously to both of us, you have called into existence a healthier tone of mind. When I first heard the voice which took me back to my early youth, I conjured you in my imagination, not as I rejoice to see you, but as one hardly less fair, and that ideal has been to me a solace and companion and a power for good. If we never meet again, I shall be the richer for to-night's revelation, and I shall carry to the

grave, not the face I had conceived, but the face I now behold.'

Graham's utterance was choked by emotion, and almost unconsciously he took Hester's hand, and their eyes met.

He rose, for he felt he had presumed upon his opportunity; and, as Hester also rose and took his proffered arm, she said, with a hardihood which surprised her as she remembered the event afterwards,

'Why must we never meet again?'

Upon this hint he spake:

'May I be permitted some day to divulge still further the influence which, unknown to you, you have exercised over me since that day, and again since we met in the field at Flinders?'

'Yes,' was the response which reached his enraptured ears as she lingered to gather a spray of mignonette.

'Perhaps I may venture to call upon you?' he added, with bated breath.

'Mamma will invite you to visit us,' replied Hester, as they re-entered the concert-room.

The keen eye of the physician rightly divined by Aspen's beaming countenance that the ideal face pictured on the canvas had been ousted from its shrine in his heart by a real face and a living soul as loyal and as pure as his own, and he rejoiced that it was so.

The no less observant eye of Mrs. Tierney detected in Hester's face a smile of contentment which satisfied her that, in requesting the graceful artist to offer her his arm, she had not displeased her daughter.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LAST WISH.

DR. EUSTACE repaired the following day to Regent's Park, led thither by personal no less than by professional anxiety as to the condition of the young girl who had failed so sadly at a moment of hopeful expectancy, and who had already won his kindest sympathy both on account of her manifest frailty of constitution, and also for her bright disposition and gentle nature. When his carriage drew up, Ethel hastened to meet him, and led the way to the dining-room. She answered his inquiries by stating that Lena had passed a restless night and had wandered.

‘That is to be expected in her weak condi-

tion,' he explained. 'Was she quite incoherent?'

'No; she seemed under the impression that her mother had reproached her for playing the violin before the public, and had finally expelled her from her home, and that she had sought shelter with Mrs. Sparragus; but that unhappy woman was as homeless as herself, and reduced to destitution, and then, as I gathered from her sobs, they tramped the streets together, and were nearly run over, when a young man snatched them from destruction, and she awoke with a delirious cry.'

'I see the association of ideas,' remarked Dr. Eustace; 'did she comment upon her dream?'

'I asked why she screamed, she said she could only remember that some one took her in his strong arms and she felt safe.'

'Has she referred to the concert?'

'She only enquired about Hester Tierney's song, and whether Mr. Aspen liked it.'

'And, of course, you told her he did?'

'Yes; and she was pleased to hear that he took her down to coffee. And she wanted to know whether they visited the conservatory,—

wasn't that singular, because, you know, they did, and remained there a long time ?'

'And you naturally told her so ?'

'Oh yes, and she smiled and said no more, and fell asleep.'

Dr. Eustace entered the bed-room. He found the patient tranquil and endeavouring to fix her attention on a book. A glance satisfied the expert that last night's disaster, followed by a disturbing dream, had already told upon her. Her face was white and transparent as wax, while a bright spot of colour on either cheek betrayed a sad truth. Her thin hand, pencilled with blue veins, lying on the coverlet, confirmed the fatal sign. Already the contour of her face and bust had lost its roundness, and the fitful cough, deep, hollow, convulsive, left no hope that youth would triumph in the end.

With his accustomed kindness, Dr. Eustace interested Lena by referring to the topics of the day, cheering her with vivacious remarks and anecdotes while attentively observing the indications of her disease. Without disturbing her or interrupting the thread of his conversation, he placed his head against her bosom and then

between her shoulders. A moment sufficed to inform him on the subject of his investigations, and his lively sallies and encouraging comments flowed on as before.

‘I think we must give Miss Lena a nurse to look after her little comforts,’ he said, smiling at the sufferer. ‘We mustn’t allow Miss Clive to knock herself up.’

‘Oh, she is so good to me, Dr. Eustace, so very, very good.’

‘My dear child,’ said Ethel, kissing her, ‘it is a real happiness to me to be of use to you.’

‘I know it, Ethel; you and your father are ruining me!’ replied Lena, admonishingly.

‘That’s why I think we had better have an experienced nurse who won’t ruin her, you know,’ interposed the physician, addressing Ethel. ‘It always disturbs an invalid to think she is taxing a friend, however willing that friend may be. What does Miss Lena herself say?’

‘I should wish to have a nurse.’

‘That’s right and sensible. Now, if you have a preference for anyone, Miss Lena, pray tell

us. It is always best for a patient to have the nurse of his or her choice. There is Mrs. Beaver.'

Lena was silent for some minutes, she was considering the point and formulating her decision.

'Let Hester Tierney come,' she said, and relapsed into meditation without stating her reasons for the preference.

Dr. Eustace entirely concurred in Lena's choice, and it was at once decided that Hester Tierney should undertake as soon as possible the duties for which she was pre-eminently qualified.

On descending the stairs, the physician found Mr. Clive awaiting him, and he followed him into the dining-room, closing the door behind him.

'My dear Eustace, tell me exactly what state you find our poor child in,' said Mr. Clive, with great solicitude; 'is she better?'

Dr. Eustace shrugged his shoulders and replied, sorrowfully,

'She will never be better,'

Mr. Clive was deeply shocked. He desired

the physician to be seated, and took a chair by his side.

‘Tell me everything,’ he said, in a subdued voice.

‘I grieve to say the left lung is gone ; the right one is highly congested.’

‘But you do not forbid us to hope?’ urged Mr. Clive, pathetically.

‘What have I just told you? Can you find hope in what I said? Listen to that cough,—note how hollow and deep it is. Hark! That is the answer to your question.’

Mr. Clive buried his face in his hands.

‘My poor, fatherless, motherless child! So bright, so pure-minded, so gentle! We had such hope in her, we loved her, Ethel and I, as though she belonged to us!’

‘It is an inscrutable mystery, Clive, that the precious should be so often taken just when their lives seem to promise so much,’ argued the physician, solemnly, ‘but we see it every day.’

‘Do you think the poor girl is conscious of her state?’

‘I believe she is, for she seems often lost in

meditation. I think, Clive, her friends should be warned.'

'Friends! The poor child has none. But do you mean to suggest, Eustace, that her end is near?'

'She cannot live many weeks.'

Dr. Eustace left Mr. Clive fairly unmanned; he loved Lena as his own child, and the prospect of losing her so soon was a bitter grief. Fortunately his busy life afforded him many distractions from this domestic sorrow, and a few minutes after Dr. Eustace's departure another visitor was announced. It was Lapwing, who was immediately admitted and closeted with him in his private room.

Sister Hester arrived at the house within a few hours, and relieved Ethel, who had kept unwearied watch at the bedside of her friend ever since her attack. Hester and Lena had met but rarely; nevertheless, they esteemed one another sincerely, for they were of an age, and there was a greater identity of disposition between them than between Lena and Miss Clive, though these latter were deeply attached to one another, and Miss Clive ceded her place

with great reluctance and only on the stipulation that she should spend half a day in the sick-room occasionally, to enable Hester to obtain necessary change and rest.

Lena with great interest watched Hester as she busied herself in the numberless little offices which go to alleviate the irksome and painful hours of sickness, and she observed that again and again she stood rapt before the painting of the 'Queen of the Glen' which hung on the wall, and the circumstance seemed to be a gratification to the sufferer, who remembered that her friend Ethel rarely noticed it, and she one day challenged Hester on the subject.

'You seem to like that painting, Hester?'

'It is lovely.'

'Do you know who painted it?'

'I see Graham Aspen's name on it,' replied Hester, colouring slightly.

'What is your opinion of that gentleman?'

Hester was rather taken aback by the abruptness and nature of the question; but she replied, with perfect candour:

'I think him a very able artist and a good man.'

‘I am glad you think so well of him. I wish you to do so.’

It was a strange remark for the sick girl to make, and Hester betrayed surprise, which Lena noticed.

‘Some day I will explain myself, but I do not feel quite able to-day,’ she said, and closed her eyes as though seeking sleep. Presently she resumed: ‘Not to-day—not to-day.’

Another long pause ensued, while Hester, noiselessly moving about, ministered to her comforts. At length Lena continued:

‘I have heard from Ethel such an account of your song at our concert the other night, Hester, that I long to hear it. Would you sing it to me?’

‘My dear Lena, I will do anything that can afford you pleasure,’ and Hester stood at the foot of the bed and at once complied with the poor sufferer’s request, singing ‘Auld Robin Gray’ with her accustomed sweetness and pathos.

‘Thank you, I can now understand all Ethel told me,’ said Lena, much moved.

‘What can Ethel have told you?’ inquired Hester, whose curiosity was excited.

‘That Graham Aspen was quite affected by your voice.’

‘Indeed!’

‘Did he not tell you so when you strolled together into the conservatory?’

There was neither bitterness nor sarcasm in this question. The words came to Lena’s lips, and she spoke with her usual confidence and candour.

‘Yes,’ answered Hester, with equal frankness; ‘he said the song recalled his mother.’

‘If you did that, you enjoyed a most precious privilege, and it ought to have made you happy, Hester.’

‘It did.’

Lena made no further remark at the time, but Hester noticed that she again relapsed into the mood of thought which had been her habit of late, and sometimes a tear would trickle down her cheek, giving evidence of a great mental disturbance, when Hester would endeavour to win her back to her more natural state of tranquillity by reading some book of her choice.

Mr. Clive and Ethel were frequent visitors in the sick chamber, and they always quitted it much comforted and reassured, for Lena received them with a placid joy which illumined her face and gave them a delusive hope that possibly Dr. Eustace might have erred in his diagnosis of her case.

‘Would you wish me to invite Mrs. Lipperty to visit you?’ inquired Mr. Clive, on one occasion, feeling it a duty not to allow her relatives to remain in ignorance of the precarious state of her health.

‘If you think she ought to be informed that I—I—am ill, do so. But I don’t know how I shall be able to bear her reproofs and exhortations now!’ was Lena’s sorrowful reply, and it decided Mr. Clive at once.

‘Perhaps we had better wait, dear Lena, till you are—strong again?’ he inquired, pitifully.

‘Yes, yes;’ and the sick girl closing her eyes was sufficient intimation that she was unequal to further conversation, and he withdrew.

‘Hester dear,’ she said, one day, reviving somewhat after much suffering and great pros-

tration, 'come and sit by me ; I wish to speak to you while I have the power.'

Hester hurried to her side.

'Come close. I can't speak very loud to-day. You know, dear, as well as I do, and Dr. Eustace, that I shall not be a burden to my good, generous friends here much longer,—don't weep, dear, it will be so much better for me and for everybody when—when—it comes.'

Hester held Lena's hand, upon which the tears fell fast as she hung over the sufferer.

'I have a secret which I intended to carry with me to the grave, dear friend, but I have been thinking that, if I confide it to you, I shall feel happier, and you may some day be happier too for the knowledge.'

Hester folded the poor girl in her gentle arms and kissed her. Lena responded to the kiss passionately.

'From what Ethel has told me, Mr. Aspen has given evidence of a feeling towards you which he has never shown to anyone, and you evinced no displeasure. This is an immense comfort to me ; for, Hester, I love that man.'

Hester unconsciously manifested surprise.

‘You are naturally astonished at my daring to love a man who has never permitted himself to have a thought about me, and whom I have seen but rarely. You must not blame me, Hester,’ she continued, after a pause, turning appealingly to the devoted girl, in whose arms she felt sheltered, ‘I never meant him to know it, nobody could even suspect it by my manner, but I loved him for his fine character, his unselfishness, his courage, and his poverty. And now, dear, I have an entreaty to make to you.’

Lena rested a few minutes and tasted a refreshing and sustaining draught which Hester handed her.

‘Words spoken on a death-bed are solemn and sacred, and what I wish to say is not in idleness. If you would be a happy woman, Hester, give him encouragement when he approaches you. Take him to your heart; share the noble purpose of his life, to guide, to encourage, to help, and happiness such as I have dared to dream of will be yours.’

Lena, exhausted with the effort, sank on to her pillow, but, though weak and emaciated, she was in no way depressed. On the contrary,

she seemed as if a burden had been thrown off her mind, and, while Hester sobbed distressfully, she was serene and even bright.

‘I do not wish to speak of this again, Hester. It is done with. I feel happier, and I can now give all my thoughts to other things. But, in case I may not always be able to collect my ideas, there is one last service I wish to ask, dear.’

Hester pressed her hand in token of assent, for she could not speak.

‘In that box on my table you will find a white moss-rose. It is withered already. I should like it placed on my bosom when——’

Lena did not complete the sentence, but it was needless. Hester comprehended her thought, and the girls could only surrender themselves to the exquisite relief of tears as they clung to one another in an embrace of tender affection.

A few days before her spirit took flight, Lena asked Hester for pen, ink, and paper, saying,

‘I have but one possession, dear, beyond my little income which dies with me, and that is the precious picture facing me, given me by good Mr. Clive on my last birthday. It is for you, dear, and I must make my little will.’

Whereupon she wrote with a feeble hand her wish in a few words, signing the paper.

It was her last act and deed. Within a few hours a messenger arrived at Saville Row, summoning Dr. Eustace. When he arrived Lena was beyond human aid. Hester and Ethel stood beside the bed, each holding the hand she extended to them, while Mr. Clive supported her in his arms. Her face was turned to Hester, her eyes fixed upon hers with a smile of perfect peace and happiness and trust as she drew her last breath. It was only by her closing eyelids and the dull weight of the poor, wasted body that they knew she had passed to her last sleep.

On the day of the funeral, after the body had been lowered into the grave and the mourners had departed, a young man, who had lingered behind, stepped to the grave-side and scattered upon the coffin the contents of a basket of flowers he had in his hand. It was the last tribute of respect and esteem offered to the memory of the dead. The man was Graham Aspen.

CHAPTER XII.

JEM'S FIRST PUPIL.

JEM STARKIE was as welcome a visitor at Saville Row as Graham Aspen himself, for the acute physician was not slow to discern in him as strong and natural a feeling for art as that evinced by his nephew; consequently, his treasures of engravings and paintings were always accessible to him, and Jem, to Dr. Eustace's gratification, so appreciated the privilege that he invaded the 'den' and the dining-room at all hours. Some of the physician's most valuable paintings hung in the latter room, and, when Jem betook himself thither in the morning, the numerous patients awaiting their turn for an interview with the great specialist

wondered what ailment it could possibly be which brought to that lugubrious ante-room so handsome a young man who, instead of vacantly leaning over journals, magazines, and funny books provided to kill time, made at once for a Claude, or a Turner, or a Salvator Rosa, and planted himself before it with the steadiness of a camera, his eyes being the lens and his brain the sensitive plate. He thus 'took' the examples of the respective masters, and then, as if shutting up the photographic apparatus of his mind, retreated from the room, to the stupefaction of the other visitors, who naturally imagined themselves superseded in their visit to the consulting-room by the stalwart young man who, however, sped back to Thistle Grove the richer for the technical method he had mastered, and which he applied to the work in hand.

With his art-education under Graham, Jem's more social, mental, and personal graces matured. Doubtless the improvement in the latter was in some degree traceable to Mrs. Starkie's culinary successes, supplemented as they were by the frequent delivery of nutritious and toothsome compounds from the laboratory

of Birch, of Cornhill. Certain it is, that the amelioration discernible in the pupil in all respects dated from the hour of his audacious entry into Aspen's penetrale and the noble absolution he received on the spot for that offence.

And Jem more than requited his master for his generous encouragement. His mind expanded with its new and healthy activity, and, as if to prove that it was not confined to one groove of art, he varied his daily studies by recreating himself in the evening with music, and with that view he procured a zither and taxed its capabilities, as well as his own, in his bed-room. Not unfrequently Mrs. Starkie, distracted with his tentative fingering, would burst into the room, her hands pressed to her ears, and present to his abashed gaze a picture of horror worthy of Le Brun's pencil; but she suppressed the exclamations of distress which rose to her lips, remembering how time had falsified her evil bodements when, in the early days, he 'messed everything in the house with his nasty paints,' and she reflected that it might in the end turn out that those unearthly twangs

and tweaks were the rudiments of beautiful music, as the daubs on his pinafores ripened into pictures which people were beginning to clamour for ; so the worthy woman stuffed wool into her ears, and bore the infliction with motherly resignation and hope. And her hope was justified by the result. Jem's performance soon ceased to be agonising, the wool was thrown into the fire, and Jem was encouraged to play and even to sing in his mother's sitting-room, until, finding infinite pleasure in his success, she had serious thoughts of counting out another twenty-five sovereigns and handing it to him as a well-merited honorarium.

In the studio Jem was now left much to his own devices, Graham being absent a good deal. The unusual circumstance perplexed Jem, and, in reply to his inquiries, Graham stated that he was painting a portrait in Eaton Square, the light in that neighbourhood being more favourable than in Thistle Grove. This explanation was satisfactory to a certain extent, but it did not account for the necessity of Graham's attendance at Eaton Square in the evening when there was no daylight, nor for his

regular visits there on Sundays, a day he scrupulously devoted to rest and books.

A solution of this problem was, however, obtained from Mr. Clive. That gentleman, faithful to his original professions of friendly interest, frequently drove to Thistle Grove to visit Aspen, and on one of these occasions he found Jem alone, and Graham's absence was naturally alluded to.

‘Don't you know where he goes to?’ he asked, amused at Jem's anxiety.

‘No, I do not.’

‘Hasn't he told you anything?’

‘He has told me he is painting a portrait in Eaton Square, and he finds the light there admirable.’

Mr. Clive laughed heartily :

‘Is that all?’

‘He says there is some fine stained glass in St. Peter's Church, so I suppose he spends his Sundays in the sacred edifice.’

Mr. Clive again burst into laughter, which was to Jem simply inexplicable.

‘You are evidently not admitted into Aspen's

secret counsels,' remarked the alderman, quaintly.

Jem was not aware that he was quite excluded from his friend's confidences.

'But there is one thing no man admits until he's found out,' pursued the alderman.

Jem was still perplexed.

'And that is—when he's in love,' explained Mr. Clive. 'Can you understand now why Aspen spends his mornings and evenings and Sundays in Eaton Square?'

Jem scratched his head, but the operation did not assist his imagination.

'Mrs. and Miss Tierney live in Eaton Square, and I'm sure you will agree with me, Starkie, that our dear Graham can't look too much on Miss Hester's sweet face and into her soft eyes, with a view to painting her portrait faithfully; and, as it behoves an artist to convey character as well as features, our friend cannot do better than spend his evenings in her society, and take her to St. Peter's Church on Sunday. That's the way to do it effectually.'

It all now stood revealed to Jem's intelligence. He remembered that Mrs. Tierney had sent

Aspen an invitation to her house; and he had not forgotten that, when Sister Hester so obligingly sat beside the dead tree, to be painted for the sake of a bit of colour, Aspen laboured at that bit of colour day after day, to the neglect of the beautiful tree, till he, Jem, found it necessary to tell him that he was giving too much attention to the bit of colour, and thereby damaging his composition. And then he recollected, when Miss Tierney sang 'Auld Robin Gray' at Mr. Clive's 'At home,' Aspen was like a dazed man, and, when he took the fair songstress down to coffee, he strayed with her into the conservatory, and they appeared to lose themselves in its labyrinthine avenues, for they did not emerge from it for twenty minutes. All these reminiscences served to convey to Jem's mind confirmation of Mr. Clive's dictum: that no man admits that he is in love till he is found out; and Jem thought that love must be a very peculiar complaint.

When Mr. Clive arrived, Jem was busy upon a sky-study, and, while the conversation above described was taking place, he was attentively studying the work, discovering its force and truth.

‘It strikes me that grand bit of colour is exactly the thing needed to relieve a sombre corner in my dining-room, and the size—four feet three by eight—,’ he continued, measuring it with a rule which happened to be at hand, ‘is just what I want. But perhaps you wouldn’t object to give me the advantage of your opinion by coming to Regent’s Park and viewing the position, eh?’

Jem assured Mr. Clive that it would afford him pleasure to do so.

‘Come this evening; we are alone. Dinner at a quarter-to-eight.’

Jem was overwhelmed, and cast about for excuses; but his inventive faculties were as obfuscated as his wits generally, under the surprise; and, before he could pull himself together, Mr. Clive was on his feet, and adding, ‘Mind, a quarter-to-eight; and, after dinner, we’ll turn over some drawings, and ask Ethel to give us a little music,’ he descended the stairs, and regained his brougham.

Jem recovered his normal composure by the time named, and, as the clock chimed the third quarter, he arrived at the house, with almost

vulgar punctuality. His reception was so cordial and genuine that any timidity under which he laboured was at once dispelled. Ethel was greatly struck by his manly, unaffected grace and handsome features; and Mr. Clive found, in his conversation at the dinner-table, both originality and sound sense. On adjourning to the drawing-room, Ethel was already at the pianoforte, playing with excellent skill, and Jem at once stepped to her side, and turned over the leaves of the music.

‘I see you read music?’ she said, inquiringly, as she concluded the sonata she had played.

‘Yes.’

‘Then you play?’ she asked.

‘What little I do can hardly be called playing,’ replied Jem, blushing.

‘What instrument do you play?’ persisted Ethel, taking no notice of his disclaimer.

‘I—I distract my poor mother by making the most atrocious noise possible with the zither.’

‘The zither! The most delightful instrument ever invented! Papa, Mr. Starkie plays the zither!’ she cried, cruelly publishing the fact which Jem had betrayed confidentially, and

which he would have given worlds to recall.

‘Then I can only say Mr. Starkie behaved very unhandsomely in not bringing the instrument with him,’ replied Mr. Clive, with assumed gravity and indignation. ‘But there is always a remedy for these lapses and atonement for these sins,—Mr. Starkie will have to come again to-morrow evening and bring it, or I can send Jarvis over in the morning to fetch it. Which shall it be, Mr. Starkie?’

Jem glanced at Ethel for deliverance from the embarrassing situation, and he encountered nothing but laughing, pitiless eyes, and an uncompromising echo of her father’s speech: ‘Which shall it be?’ There was no escape for Jem, and no mercy. Everybody’s hand was against him, so he surrendered.

‘I’ll bring it if you really wish it,’ he replied, abashed.

‘We do, we do!’ insisted Mr. Clive and Ethel at once, the latter adding, ‘I shall look forward to to-morrow with extreme pleasure.’ The observation was audible to Jem, but it did not extend to Mr. Clive who was at the other side of the room.

The following evening, Jem, obedient to his patron's order, arrived at the house with the vulgar punctuality of the previous day, and, strange to say, he felt little or nothing of the hesitation which beset him on that occasion. Even the prospect of having to perform and possibly making himself ridiculous in the presence of his kind friends did not afflict him, for the half dozen words addressed to him by Ethel fortified him wonderfully, and he entered the drawing-room with comparative confidence.

‘Isn't Mr. Starkie kind, papa, he has brought his zither?’ exclaimed Ethel, with vivacity.

‘Mr. Starkie is more than kind, he is indulgent, he is granting our great wish at the sacrifice of his own modest reserve.’

Jem stammered some amiable platitude as he drew the instrument from its case, and placed it before him.

‘Shall I accompany you?’ enquired Ethel, opening the pianoforte for that purpose.

Jem thanked her sincerely. But he would prefer to blunder through the piece alone, and he spread open a simple version of ‘Home, sweet Home.’ Then, without affectation of incapa-

bility, he passed his hands over the strings with excellent feeling, playing the simple notes with accuracy, and at the same time singing the words in a subdued, but perfectly clear and harmonious voice, to the astonishment of his hosts, who gave expression to their delight without stint.

Commendation coming from a quarter so versed in the science of music was an extreme encouragement to the amateur, and the remainder of the evening was spent in the performance of such pieces as he had mastered. Ethel occasionally playing on her violin, or the pianoforte. When Jem rose to take leave, Mr. Clive suddenly recollected that the folio of drawings had not been overhauled; but, as the hour was late, perhaps Mr. Starkie would favour them with his company another evening for the purpose of examining them, an invitation which Jem was not by any means disposed to decline.

On the day fixed, Jem repaired to Regent's Park to inspect the contents of the folio, when he found Ethel alone in the drawing-room intent upon eliciting dulcet notes from a zither with which her father at her request had pro-

vided her. Jem was naturally surprised, and as naturally gratified, and, as Ethel betrayed great awkwardness in fingering the strings, Jem explained the peculiarities of the instrument, and, in fact, gave instruction so lucidly that, with an intelligent pupil like Ethel, the task was as easy as it was agreeable.

When Mr. Clive entered the room he found Jem bending over the young girl and directing her movements with absorbing interest, watching her delicate hands as they daintily swept the strings.

‘Excellent!’ he cried, greatly amused. ‘Why, Ethel, my child, you must surely have been studying the zither for months in secret?’

‘Mr. Starkie is such an able teacher, papa, that I can’t help learning,’ replied Ethel, turning a radiant face to her father.

‘Do you find her pretty apt, Mr. Starkie?’ inquired Mr. Clive, addressing the young artist.

‘So apt, sir, that it is a delightful task to explain to her the little I know.’

‘That being the case, should I be taxing your kindness too much in asking you to give

Ethel the advantage of your friendly guidance till we find a professional master ?'

Jem blushed and his heart bounded and his breath became spasmodic, and he could never explain to himself why his answer to Mr. Clive's question was simply 'Thank you.' The confusion of his wits might have been due to the responsibility of imparting instruction ; or to his conscientious scruples in accepting a function he felt too unlearned himself to honestly accept ; or to a hesitation in taking up a branch of art which was fascinating enough to wean him from his more serious studies with the brush. Jem, as he tramped home that night, endeavoured to ascribe his perplexity to one or other of these convictions ; but the vision of a fair face and soft white hands hovering over the zither again and again presented itself as if to contradict each hypothesis as he advanced it, until the astounding conviction forced itself upon his mind that he must be labouring under the same complaint as Graham Aspen !

CHAPTER XIII.

CONFESSIONS.

THE light in Eaton Square was unquestionably favourable to the due examination of the lineaments of Aspen's sitter, but the process was slow, nevertheless, and the portrait advanced towards completion at a pace altogether at variance with Aspen's habit of dashing precision and effect. And a critical examination of the result of the artist's labours would have been the reverse of flattering. It would have been said that his hand had lost its cunning, or else that he had not given the subject his accustomed care. And this last explanation would have been accurate; for the fact was, the portrait had been proposed by Aspen as a means to an end, and that

end was the more recondite study of Hester's mind. He had discovered that she had become everything to him, and he had to satisfy himself that his estimate of her was well-founded; and he had, moreover, to learn whether he was anything to her. In all the affairs of his life, Graham endeavoured to keep in view one principle: to mature his idea and then to carry it out effectually and completely, and in the grave matter which now occupied his mind he felt the vital necessity of thoroughness. Hester Tierney had called into activity a dormant power in his breast—a power which appeared buried in his mother's grave, and the love thus strangely vivified was intense, all-absorbing,—but it was not blind. His naturally philosophic mind was not divorced from his heart in this matter, and thus it was that, while appearing intent upon Hester's winsome face, he was searching her mind, denying himself the happiness of passing the outskirts of the domain towards which passion urged him till he knew more of the inner life.

Graham and Hester were left much together; Mrs. Tierney had household matters to

attend to and visits to pay, consequently the portrait remained almost stationary for the reason already given.

In the room which served the purposes of an atelier for the occasion was hung Lena's bequest to Sister Hester, the 'Queen of the Glen,' and it naturally afforded a subject for conversation and admiring comment on the part of Hester; and this again led to inquiries as to the destination of the 'Beautiful in Death' picture—the dead tree.

'Mrs. Beaver and I were greatly impressed by that painting, it was touched in such a pathetic key, if I may so describe it.'

'It was so conceived. Death is always associated in my mind with sublimity; and, though I hope my mind is not a morbid one, the contemplation of a dead thing,—a thing which has been clad in all the beauty of health and freshness,—which has rejoiced in its day of strength and so ripened to its decline, is a profound, solemn pleasure, for it sums up human life, its ambitions, its pride, its joy; all this has vanished, and a memory of it only remains.

That dead tree symbolises to me a beautiful existence which has long passed away.'

Had Hester not studied Graham's peculiarity of mind, and learnt how intensely he loved the memory of his mother, she would have been at a loss to understand these utterances.

'The thought is a beautiful one,' she replied, with deep feeling, 'and one cannot but reverence the sentiment. The tree is a thing of beauty, its lifelessness notwithstanding. But it seems a pity—a mistake—to have placed a living object in contrast with it, to disturb its wholesome moral.'

'Not so!' promptly interposed Graham, 'not so, in this instance. The conjunction is, on the contrary, most happy, and seems to make complete the pictured emblem.'

Hester divined Graham's thought, she understood that in his imagination he figured himself beside a loved one who had passed away, and a flattering pride stirred her heart.

'You have not parted with that picture?' she said, inquiringly.

'No.'

‘Why not?’

‘Can *you* ask that question?’ demanded Graham, reproachfully.

Hester felt she deserved the rebuke.

‘It was wrong of me to suggest it. Pray forgive me,’ she faltered; ‘with such sacred associations attaching to it, you would not be likely to part with that picture.’

After this dialogue there was a long silence. Graham put a touch here and a touch there upon the portrait for which Hester was sitting, but the mere fact of looking into Hester’s face seemed to dissipate his artistic faculty. At any time he found it difficult to talk and paint simultaneously. To-day he could only talk.

‘I daresay, Miss Tierney, you think me a strange compound of weakness and superstition to be so influenced by a voice as I have been—and still am—by yours?’ he said, laying down his palette. ‘Tell me your opinion without fear or reserve.’

‘I say, without fear or reserve, that it is a beautiful, noble infirmity to imagine the voice of a beloved mother long passed away, and to

be encouraged by it in a moment of trial to pursue the better way.'

'And if that supposed voice from beyond the grave should arrest the hand of a frenzied wretch on the very point of violating the sanctity of his own life, and lead him gently and lovingly back to reason and the possibilities of usefulness,—if such a result should be brought about by such an agency, what would you say of it? Tell me, Miss Tierney, without hesitation.'

'I say, without hesitation, that if such a thing has been, I see in it the visible, merciful, beneficent hand of God,' was Hester's deliberate and solemn reply.

'Pardon me if I am catechising you beyond the bounds of reason, but I cannot resist the temptation of pursuing this interesting interrogatory. I learn so much and am so much cheered and strengthened in finding that our views are identical in this particular.'

'I assure you, Mr. Aspen, it is more than pleasure to me to discuss these things. It is so rarely that one meets with a friend whose ideas take this direction,' replied Hester, thus

inviting Graham to develop his thoughts further.

‘Admitting the mysterious and potent influence for good of the voice I have heard at such a supreme moment, is it strange that from that hour to this, and from this hour to my life’s end, the person owning that voice should be, as it were, the arbiter of my fate, the centre of all things to me, the source of happiness, the goal of all my hopes? Answer me, as before, frankly and freely.’

It was a tremendous issue for a lover to put before a young girl, and Hester hesitated to reply. Lena’s injunction rang in her ears, ‘Do not discourage him;’ and Hester too easily interpreted Graham’s thought, and the direction of his wish not to recognise the truth of Lena’s surmise.

But the encouraging response in her heart failed to find expression from her lips.

‘You do not answer?’ urged Aspen, anxiously.

‘The responsibility is too vast for anyone to incur. To possess such absolute power over the hopes and happiness of a generous heart

and a noble intellect seems to me as awful as it is glorious.'

'But have you not found, Miss Tierney, that, in your pious ministration to the sick, strength and resolution have always been given you for the duty you had to perform?'

'Yes, it is always so.'

'Then why can you doubt that the power which enables you to fulfil your mission of beneficence in one direction would fail to strengthen you in another?'

Lena's dying admonition again recurred to Hester, 'Do not discourage him;' and she replied:

'I was wrong to doubt. If such a noble trust fell to my lot, every faculty of body and mind would be employed in its discharge.'

Graham was moved with a deep joy. Feelings hitherto unknown and unsuspected stirred him. He found himself admitted to the confidences, the aspirations, the ruling principles of the woman towards whom he yearned with an absorbing passion. He had unveiled his heart to her in a symbol. She had comprehended, and answered in the plain language of faith and

loyalty, and his happiness seemed too great for immediate realisation. He looked into her upturned face, and met the earnest soft eyes of perfect sympathy which told him that which no words of Hester's could have betrayed. He took her willing hand.

‘Hester!’ he said, in tones scarcely above a whisper, ‘Hester, you are necessary to my happiness. But that avowal shall never pass my lips again, if you tell me in this moment of mutual confession that I am not necessary to yours.’

Hester hung her head and was silent, but Graham could hear her heart throbbing, and could see the crimson mounting to her face.

‘If I am not everything to you, Hester, as you are to me,—if you have a hope or a thought in which I have no place, and if life has fair promises for you regardless of my participation in it,—I vow here, in this solemn hour, never to let my shadow cross your path, never by a look, sigh or breath after to-day, to——’

Hester started, and placed her hand upon her lover's lips.

‘Graham!’ she said, bursting into tears,

‘Graham, do I deserve these threats?’ and her head sank on to his shoulder.

‘Say you love me, Hester.’

‘I have long loved you, Graham.’

‘Then let us henceforward live for one another,’ whispered the young artist, as he held her in a passionate embrace.

‘Yes,’ was the soft response as their lips met, and Lena’s injunction was fulfilled.

It was surprising how the portrait advanced after the felicitous understanding thus arrived at. The light in Eaton Square did not materially improve, but Aspen’s perception of Hester’s form, texture, and colour became amazingly keen, and he applied himself to his work with such success that when Mrs. Tierney entered the room a few days after the episode above described, she was astonished at the transformation.

‘Why, Mr. Aspen, what has happened? When I last saw the painting, I must confess to you I was in despair! It looked no more like my child than a bad photograph might do, and day after day it seemed to get worse and

worse! And now, as by a miracle, it has burst into a magnificent portrait! What has happened?’

‘Yes, a miracle has happened, my dear Mrs. Tierney,’ replied Graham, joyously; ‘shall I tell your dear mother how it was wrought?’ he continued, turning to Hester, who assented and ran out of the room to escape the consequences.

‘My dear Mrs. Tierney,’ commenced Graham, leading her to a couch and taking a seat by her side, ‘if your daughter’s portrait has not advanced satisfactorily of late, it is because I have been engaged in a more absorbing study. Success or failure in a picture concerns my professional reputation alone; success or failure in the matter of my recent scrutiny involves my happiness—my life. And not mine alone.’

Mrs. Tierney perceived the direction of his words, and encouraged him by a sign to proceed.

‘Although I have endeavoured to conceal my aspirations under a passive bearing, it is not improbable you may have suspected that my feelings regarding your daughter have not been

those placid ones of common friendship. I see by your gesture that it is so. I am glad of this. It emboldens me to speak without reservation.'

Graham drew a deep breath, and paused a few moments, then continued :

'I have found that I was not mistaken when I attributed noble aims, high principles, womanly self-devotion, and the tenderest of hearts to Hester; and to my joy I found that she has viewed me as not altogether destitute of those qualities which go to make a man worthy of esteem. Satisfied on these vital points, I have in a few plain words confessed myself to her; I have told her how, unknowingly, she has a long while past possessed a saving influence over me, until she has become necessary to my happiness and to the completion of the purpose of my life. And this I now declare to you. Question Hester, and she will own to you, as she has owned to me, that I have a place in her heart.'

Mrs. Tierney was touched by the candour and earnestness of Graham's avowal, and laying a gentle hand on his arm she said :

‘Whether I consider my child’s happiness or my own, I find nothing but satisfaction in what I have seen and known and now hear from your own lips. That Hester had been to you an influence for good is a grateful surprise to me, for I happen to know that you, equally unconsciously, have been the means of directing her thoughts to the beneficent work of tending the sick.’

Aspen evinced the greatest surprise at this statement.

‘You will remember that, when you first consulted Dr. Eustace, you were seized with an illness in the waiting-room and swooned.’

‘Yes.’

‘But you do not know that a young girl present flew to your assistance, bathed your temples with Cologne water, and supported your head on her shoulder. That girl was Hester, and that was her first experience in nursing. But it was a happy circumstance, for it called into existence a faculty which, since that day, has grown and demanded exercise, and its exercise has been a blessing to herself as well as to others.’

Graham heard the statement without an im-

mediate rejoinder ; he was absorbed in thought.

At length he replied :

‘Again I discern the controlling hand of Destiny ! Events which we call accidental have their definite purposes ! Unconsciously we have been in preparation for the responsibility of each other’s happiness. Our minds have been guided to the same bourne, and the finger of Providence, which has so wondrously moulded them into harmony, is gradually revealed to us ! I now feel that I have done right in this matter.’

‘And you will have your reward.’

CHAPTER XIV.

TANGLE *v.* SPARRAGUS.

No. 2, Tapioca Terrace, was the arena of a great conflict. It was not the actual collision of hostile forces bent on mutual destruction ; nor the bloodless war of words which convulses the gladiators of debate ; nor the clash of those intellectual combatants who give and receive rapier-thrusts of wit and repartee ; but it was none the less the scene of a great and agonising struggle, for Mrs. Sparragus had to suffer the silent rebukes of her husbands as they hung side by side and glared at her from their gilt frames on the wall.

Ever since the disaster which had annihilated her comfortable means and which had been

brought about by her guide, counsellor, and friend, Stephen Honeydew, the pictured architects of her fortune showed her no mercy. No matter in what part of her bed-room she sought refuge, their fierce eyes followed her. They stared at her in the silent watches of the night with their sleepless, glazed eyes. It was useless to extinguish the night-light. Their angry flashes only grew more vivid, and the poor widow's appeal for pardon only drew upon her a darker frown and more condemnatory scowl.

‘You know nobody suffers for it but me!’ she would remonstrate, ‘nobody but me and Susan. Don’t crush me with those angry looks! I know I deserve it. The mischief is done, and I’ll bear the consequences patiently if you’ll only pity me! I’ll pinch and pare and starve—yes, I’ll starve without a murmur if you’ll only look with kinder eyes! You think me ungrateful? No! I have always been grateful to you both in my prosperity, and I’ll be grateful to you in my rags! You are right,—I don’t deserve all the love and kindness you lavished on me. I was more than stupid—I was wicked. But you

both spoiled me,—I thought all men were as good and noble as you, when I ought to have known there was no one like you in all the world! Yes, I have wasted all your bounty provided for me in my ignorance and indolence! But, oh, turn away those eyes! They used to look so lovingly at me. I can't bear it! I shall die—I must die!

‘Oh, mem!’ exclaimed Susan, roused from her slumbers by her mistress’s lamentations, and entering the room with a candle, ‘don’t worry your poor self so dreadfully about them picters. Of course their eyes follow you about the room; and they follow me about too till I almost blush and I think it quite rude of ’em, and, if you’ll allow me, I’ll turn them with their faces to the wall so that we may only have the backs of their heads, which I should prefer!’ and Susan advanced to give effect to her brilliant suggestion when she received a rebuke from her mistress which effectually cured her of offering a remedy of that kind.

‘Susan, go back to your room! What business have you to come in and listen to our conversation!’

‘I’m sure, mem, I’d no idea of listening, only it grieves me to see you taking on so, and not a bit of use if you was to cry your eyes out. I can’t bear to hear you for ever a-scolding of yourself!’

‘Then, Susan, if you can’t bear to see that I’ve got a conscience, you can look out for another place! I can manage very well, there’s only the bit of cooking to do, and the bed to make, and the bell to answer.’

‘Oh, mem!’

‘And glad you ought to be to get away from all this ruin which I’ve brought upon myself!’

Susan sobbed.

‘And what right have I to expect you to starve and suffer for my sins! No, Susan, you don’t deserve it. You’ve had no share in bringing it about, and I can’t allow you to share the consequences. I give you a month’s warning, and you can go and be happier in another place where there’s no foolish old woman to trouble you!’

These concluding words completed Susan’s discomfiture, they caused the cup of her grief

to brim over; all distinction of mistress and maid was forgotten, and she fell weeping on to Mrs. Sparragus's neck.

‘Oh, mem, unless you want to break my heart, never talk again about me looking after another place! Scold me if you like, but, oh, mem, never give me warning! I couldn't leave you! I won't leave you! I should never be happy again if I deserted you in your misery! I don't want no wages, and I can do with very little food. I'm fond of dry bread and there is nothing nicer than weak tea. Let me stay, dear missus, I'll never say anything to upset you!’ and Susan kissed her mistress again and again.

‘Go, my poor child, and take your rest. I'm grieved that I said anything to pain you. Go!’ and Mrs. Sparragus buried her face in her handkerchief, while Susan reluctantly obeyed the order and noiselessly withdrew to her room, which adjoined her mistress's.

Next morning the dialogue of the night, with its threats and appeals, its tears and laments, was forgotten, for the sun shone, the perfume from the flower-beds filled the house, and Susan carolled over her work as though it realised

her conceptions of earthly felicity. Happiness is contagious; a bright presence in a home diffuses brightness, and sorrow and discontent flit like mists before the sun. It was so in this instance. Mrs. Sparragus seemed to have cast off her morbid mood with her night-cap; she no longer apostrophised the portraits of the successive late-lamenteds, but bustled about and gave Susan a kindly 'good-morrow' instead of notice to quit; and yet her affairs were not a whit less desperate, nor her hope of ever propitiating the successive late-lamenteds a fraction greater. It was due partly to her natural spirit of resignation to the inevitable trials of life, but still more to Susan. Susan chirruped like a bird, for she was happy, happy in her conviction that her mistress said what she did not mean,—a thing which in the abstract she considered positively wicked, but in the present case highly praiseworthy, and that, consequently, no severance would ever take place; and Mrs. Sparragus on her part had discovered that the poor drudge, the humble, untutored hireling, was as necessary to her own happiness as she was to hers, and that

knowledge was a balm to her wounded heart. It was joy evolved from sorrow.

‘Oh my!’ exclaimed Susan, gazing at Aspen’s painting of Lena, as she placed on the table a nosegay she had gathered, ‘how that poor, dear Miss Lena haunts me! I can’t keep my eyes off that beautiful picter of her! It makes me happy to look at it! Now, that’s a face, mem, that does one good. See how she smiles, poor dear! *She* never looks black. Do you know, mem, every time I catch sight of that sweet face a-smiling at me I come all over! for it seems as if the poor dear, when she died, sent her blessed spirit to be with us.’

‘Blessed indeed!’ repeated Mrs. Sparragus, piously.

‘Yes, mem, and whenever I have naughty thoughts I look at her, and she seems to say, “Susan, that isn’t the way to be happy like me!” and then I’m sorry, and try to be better.’

‘I rejoice to hear this, Susan.’

‘And I hope you’ll forgive me, mem, for saying so, but I think if you was to sit and talk to her instead of to those two picters in the bedroom, she’d give you comfort in this dreadful

misfortune, instead of scolding you like the two—why, dear me, if here isn't Mr. Clive's carriage a-pulling up at the gate, mem!" and Susan rushed to the window.

‘Mr. Clive?’

‘Yes, and another gent along with 'im carrying a blue bag. I'll run and get your company cap, mem!’ and Susan darted into the bed-room and immediately returned with a clean crape cap which she popped on to her mistress's head almost before that good woman quite realised the situation, and before Mr. Clive had knocked at the door,

‘My dear Mrs. Sparragus,’ said Mr. Clive, after the ordinary greeting, ‘our friend Mr. Tangle and I have come to talk to you about this sad, sad business, if you have no objection.’

‘Oh, no, sir;’ with a sigh.

‘When I fully comprehended the extent of the calamity, I felt it my duty to make your solicitors, Messieurs Tangle and Wrench, acquainted with the circumstances.’

‘It was very good of you, sir.’

‘And I must say,’ interposed Tangle, rubbing his hands together, ‘that in all my professional

experience I never met with a case in which there was such consummate villainy on one side and—and——’

‘Amiable credulity,’ suggested Mr. Clive.

‘Wicked folly,’ suggested Mrs. Sparragus.

‘Amiable credulity on the other,’ added Mr. Tangle, still rubbing his hands together.

‘Ah, sir, you put it too kindly,’ replied Mrs. Sparragus; ‘it was foolish and worse than foolish of me, and I deserve to suffer.’

‘And from what I know of you, Mrs. Sparragus, you are resigning yourself to the consequences, whatever they may be?’ put in Mr. Clive, sympathetically.

‘The Lord helping me, I hope to bear it!’

‘Our good friends, Messieurs Tangle and Wrench, have taken up the case with their customary judgment——’

‘Greatly assisted by Mr. Clive,’ interposed Tangle.

‘And, as you know, they have from time to time brought sundry documents which you have signed.’

‘Yes, Mr. Clive.’

‘Perhaps, Mr. Tangle, you will explain the present position.’

‘Certainly.’

Then addressing Mrs. Sparragus, the solicitor continued :

‘When we had all the circumstances before us, we had to confess ourselves nonplussed—that is to say, we were staggered.’

‘Ah, yes, how could it be otherwise?’

‘Unless, you know, we could find a way out of the dilemma, and, between you and me, it must be a very remarkable difficulty if the law can’t do something towards getting out of it;’ and Mr. Tangle rubbed his hands together and laughed.

But the laughter did not prove infectious. Mrs. Sparragus failed to discover any joke to the remark, and Mr. Clive’s eyes were fixed on the life-like portrait of Lena.

‘Mr. Clive has given us invaluable aid, and we had an able coadjutor in Lapwing, who seems to be a man of resources; and, finally, you have assisted us more than anybody.’

‘I assisted you?’ echoed the widow, in

astonishment. ‘Why, I’ve not stirred from this house!’

‘It wasn’t necessary that you should. You signed your name to the papers I brought, and we couldn’t wish for greater assistance.’

‘How strange that seems!’ reflected Mrs. Sparragus.

‘Precisely. A piece of paper with the right words upon it can effect more than an entire regiment of the Guards!’

Mrs. Sparragus opened her eyes and mouth to their fullest extent, and she was only able to gasp inarticulately:

‘Dear me!’

‘I’ve known a document reduce a client of ours to beggary,’ continued Tangle, by way of illustration, ‘and another document upset the first and put our client all right again.’

‘Wonderful!’

‘Now, if such a result could be by any means brought about with this dreadful mess of yours, may I ask what your feelings would be?’

Mrs. Sparragus shook her head in evidence of incredulity and the absurdity of the hypothesis. Mr. Clive took up the parable:

‘We earnestly hope you will preserve your usual calmness, and that the only feeling you have will be that of thankfulness when we tell you that the case just described by Mr. Tangle is your own. In the skilful hands of your solicitor all the cruel wrong under which you have suffered has been repaired and the evil wrought by Honeydew undone, and I most heartily congratulate you!’ and Mr. Clive held out his hand which Mrs. Sparragus took mechanically.

‘But—but—this is more than I can understand, sir—it is all a dream!’

‘I will explain it in a few words,’ said Tangle, opening his bag and selecting one of several papers tied together with red tape. ‘Honeydew, under the powers you imprudently allowed him to procure, gradually converted all your funded property and other securities into cash,—that is to say, into Bank of England notes. Those notes, there is not a doubt, lie in his pocket at the bottom of the Atlantic. We have, in spite of the difficulties, obtained the numbers of the whole of them, and, upon the production of the indemnity which you have signed, the Bank has replaced them. The total amount is,

we find, seven thousand two hundred and fifty-five pounds, and that sum is in our safe custody as representing you.'

Mrs. Sparragus held up her hands in speechless amazement as Mr. Tangle handed her a detailed statement. If a pleasurable thought crossed her dazed mind at that moment it was a conviction that the two successive late-lamenteds would no longer frown upon her in anger.

'The next difficulty,' continued Tangle, with oracular solemnity, 'was with the Flinders property and Tapioca Terrace. These you had assigned to Honeydew—or rather he had assigned them to himself, as you executed the indenture in blind confidence,—and Honeydew raised money upon them; but, as you have made a declaration that you signed the said document under a misapprehension and without being acquainted with its purport, the deed was fraudulently obtained, and is therefore vitiated. That was our case, and the Court of Chancery did not hesitate to annul the transfer. Mr. Blowers held the deeds as security for the advance, and we gave him notice of the fraud and called upon him to produce and surrender the

said deeds on payment of the amount advanced, with interest due and his costs. This was satisfactorily concluded yesterday, and when I tell you that the title-deeds of Flinders and Tapioca Terrace are in this blue-bag, you will admit that the bits of paper you signed have, as I said, effected more than a whole regiment of the Guards could have done.'

If a rejoinder rose from Mrs. Sparragus's heart to her lips it had no time for utterance, for a hysterical cry outside the door startled the widow and her visitors. Mr. Clive rushed to the spot, and there found Susan tottering and clinging to the banister in her agitation. On Mr. Clive inquiring the cause of her distress she said,

'Oh, sir, is it true that my missus is put all right again?'

'What can you mean, Susan?'

'That villain, Honeydew! Is it really true that you've got it all back, sir?'

'Susan, Susan, you've been listening!' Mr. Clive said, admonishingly.

'Yes, sir, I always do when I expect my missus is likely to take on, and I made sure you

had come with more bad news when I see you looking so serious and the lawyer with his blue bag. Oh, sir, tell me : is it all right ?'

'Yes, Susan.'

'The Lord be praised !' and Susan dashed into the pantry, stifling her sobs of joy in her cotton-frock.

As soon as Mrs. Sparragus was restored to comparative equanimity under Mr. Clive's gentle suasion, and she was able to grasp the astounding fact that, by the aid of the law and the instrumentality of the documents she had signed, as advised by Tangle and Wrench, she was not much the worse for Honeydew's machinations, Tangle thought the moment opportune to remind her that he was prepared to take her further instructions. Now, instructions in matters of business were precisely the one thing Mrs. Sparragus was incapable of giving. She was quite a typical housewife, and in giving orders to Susan or to butcher, baker, and buttermilk, she was not to be surpassed in discretion and logical sequence of ideas. But she had never had occasion to give her mind to matters of business, as Honeydew had discovered, and each

of her successive late-lamenteds had considerably forborne to tax her outside her domestic province; when Tangle, therefore, broached the uncongenial topic she declared, with her natural candour and simplicity, that she did not understand him a bit.

This apparent fact gave Mr. Clive serious misgivings,—should a second Honeydew turn up, all the mischief might be repeated and not end so innocuously! The dear old soul must be saved from herself! He therefore offered a suggestion,—that the whole amount be paid to her bankers, who would invest it in the funds and receive the dividends in the usual way. The deeds relating to Flinders and Tapioca Terrace would, of course, be lodged in the same safe custody. At this point Mrs. Sparragus suddenly evinced a perfect mastery of business by interposing a negative.

‘No,’ she said, with emphasis; ‘no.’

Mr. Clive, notwithstanding his astonishment, was delighted at the tardy display of resolution of some kind.

‘What course do you propose to adopt?’ he asked.

‘Do just as you say with everything, except Flinders.’

‘Then what are your wishes as to Flinders?’ enquired the lawyer.

‘Is Flinders really mine again?’

‘Undoubtedly.’

‘And I can dispose of it as I wish?’

‘Most certainly.’

‘Then the dearest wish of my heart will be gratified! I give it to Mr. Aspen.’

Tangle dropped his pen and gazed at Mrs. Sparragus over his spectacles in a manner which seemed to say, ‘Well, this tops everything!’

‘To Mr. Graham Aspen,’ repeated the widow, to avoid the possibility of a mistake, which was another proof of the rapid development of her business instincts.

‘Give the Flinders property away! surely, my dear madam, you——’

‘Yes, to Graham Aspen. Be very particular about the name, if you please.’

‘What, fling Flinders at his head!’ expostulated Tangle ‘you can hardly mean——’

‘Yes, I do mean it.’

‘But if Mr. Aspen should decline the gift?’ urged the solicitor, fairly cornered.

‘Then Mr. Aspen can fling it back again,’ replied Mrs. Sparragus, with the serene dignity of one who has mastered a legal difficulty of great magnitude.

Tangle glanced towards Mr. Clive for help in the peculiar situation; he felt thoroughly beaten.

‘Yes,’ said the alderman, ‘I happen to know that such has long been Mrs. Sparragus’s wish. She feels she owes him a debt, and he certainly once rendered her a great service. But I naturally supposed she intended it as a bequest.’

‘Why may I not have the happiness of seeing him enjoy it?’ pathetically asked the widow.

‘There is no reason, dear madam, why you should not. It is a noble recognition of a gallant service, and I cannot but admire your resolution.’

‘Then I am to take it as your instructions?’ enquired Tangle, resuming his pen.

‘Yes, if you please,—and be very particular about the name—Graham Aspen, Painter.’

On taking leave of Mrs. Sparragus, Mr. Clive said,

‘I think you will be confirmed in your high opinion of Mr. Aspen when I tell you that the anonymous gift you received, and with which you wrongly credited me, was from Aspen, who was deeply touched by your cruel wrongs at the hands of Honeydew. It was the price he received for Lena’s portrait.’

‘But I have never paid him for it!’ replied Mrs. Sparragus, much perplexed.

‘Some one else who also pitied your position paid the money, but I am not at liberty to divulge names.’

Tears flooded Mrs. Sparragus’s eyes.

‘Was it you, sir, who did this?’

Mr. Clive, remembering that Lapwing was the individual who actually made the payment, felt justified in prevaricating.

‘No, it was not I who paid him. Be content to remain in ignorance of the donor, since he wishes it. It is enough for you to know that it has enabled Aspen to prove himself worthy of the splendid reward you are contemplating.’

CHAPTER XV.

FLINDERS.

DR. EUSTACE and Mr. Clive were closeted together in the physician's 'den,' engaged in conversation which greatly interested them. The topic was neither etching nor engraving, nor was it in any respect pathological, for Mr. Clive appeared in excellent health and spirits, and in no need of the doctor.

‘The moment I received Graham’s letter,’ said Dr. Eustace, ‘I sent to you, for I have no doubt he wants to consult me about this splendid offer of Mrs. Sparragus, and, as you have as great an affection for him as I have, I wished you to join your voice to mine in case his honourable pride should prompt him to decline ;

and I also wish you to be made acquainted with a scheme of my own.'

'I consider it a great privilege to be present at such an interesting discussion.'

At this moment the servant ushered in the young artist, who was cordially greeted by both gentlemen.

'You wonder what brings me here, I dare say,' said Aspen, seriously.

'We surmise that you have received a communication from Tangle and Wrench on behalf of Mrs. Sparragus.'

'It is so. Then you are probably aware that she wishes to give me Flinders?'

'Yes; and both Clive and I rejoice for her sake no less than yours.'

Graham looked surprised: 'For her sake?'

'Certainly. She has long had the desire to make this disposition of that property, and her first idea on recovering her sober senses after the accomplishment of the restitution was at once to gratify a wish which does her honour. And she has done right.'

'So say I,' contributed Mr. Clive.

'But, dear sir,—Flinders! How can I rob the

generous woman of such a property?' demanded Graham, with a start.

'You are called upon to undertake a responsibility, and that is, to make it impossible for other Honeydews to swindle her out of it,' quietly replied Eustace.

'But I should be crushed with the burden of it!'

'I have greater confidence in your nerves, your heart, and your brains!' retorted the physician, quaintly, 'for I have diagnosed them all.'

'Would you have me abandon art?' pathetically demanded Aspen, glancing from Dr. Eustace to Mr. Clive.

'You are now touching upon the point we wish to bring you to. Clive is the last man to wish you to abandon the profession you adorn. As for me, I have already told you,—and I repeat it in the presence of my dear old friend Clive,—that my intention is to make some use of the superfluous means I have accumulated by employing a portion of it in the interests of Science and an equal portion in the advancement of British Art,—the two fields of study which divide my attachment, and I wish, as I have stated,

that through your instrumentality effect should be given to the latter. The problem was, how could the object be accomplished? and Mrs. Sparragus has afforded a solution—she gives you Flinders. Take it, and thank God for it!’

‘But, dear sir, where is the solution?’ demanded Graham, in bewilderment.

‘Flinders is the solution. It is a famous health-resort. In conjunction with your friend Starkie make it equally famous as an art-resort,—and here my purse comes in. Reconstruct and adapt the place as an art-school in the truest sense. Let your aim be the highest; tolerate no mediocrity; allow no trifling with art; stamp out all meretriciousness; show that it should be pursued seriously, if at all. Let your motto be Nature, and your first and last canon Truth. You are thorough; Starkie is thorough; resolve that everything done under your sway shall be thorough, and you will render the Art of your country a great service, and good Mrs. Sparragus will have assisted in a noble work, although without actually intending it.’

The picture sketched by Dr. Eustace thus rapidly and earnestly was dazzling, inspiring,

irresistible, and Aspen, whatever his prepossession may have been, could find no word of dissent; and Mr. Clive, while extolling the scheme, only regretted that he saw no way in which he could ask to be allowed to share in it, since his friend Eustace seemed to monopolise, with Mrs. Sparragus, all contributory power.

‘Nay, my dear Clive,’ replied the physician, ‘unless my senses have deceived me latterly, when I have looked in at Regent’s Park, and found your daughter absorbed in the study of the zither under an instructor, you will, by-and-by, have to contribute more than either of us, namely, the dearest possession you have. And,’ continued Dr. Eustace, laying a hand on Graham’s shoulder, ‘I shrewdly suspect that another valued friend and patient of mine, residing in Eaton Square, will equally be called upon to make a great sacrifice. But I heartily encourage both her and Clive, for infinite gain will follow each surrender,—the furtherance of human happiness; the deserved reward of conspicuous worth.’

Neither Mr. Clive nor Graham requested explanations; the physician’s delicate allusions

were perfectly understood by both, and they afforded each of them matter for reflection.

‘Now, my dear Graham, the whole matter is before you,—give us your decision. Is Flinders to have the great future I have sketched?’

‘I will accept the gift and undertake the duty you have so generously proposed,’ replied Aspen, after serious consideration, ‘but I must ask two concessions. One is, that my benefactress shall reside on the property, so that I may be as a son to her, and cheer, as best I may, her declining years.’

‘The resolution is worthy of you, Graham, and, happily, the thing can be easily arranged, for there is the Hermitage, a charming cottage in the grounds, which she had been accustomed to occupy occasionally, and which will therefore suit her exactly.’

‘And, secondly, I must ask to be allowed to set up a tablet to the effect that the establishment of Flinders as a school for the advancement of British Art is due to the munificence of Dr. Eustace.’

‘Well; be it so, if that removes the last

difficulty, and, to justify the statement, I place at your disposal twenty thousand pounds, to enable you to make Flinders worthy of the high purpose for which it is destined. Give me your hand, Graham ; and Clive is the witness of our compact, which needs no lawyer's assistance to make valid, since the money is already placed to the credit of an account opened this morning in your name at my bankers.'

Graham stupefied could offer no reply beyond a grateful pressure of the hand held out to him, and Mr. Clive was equally speechless in the presence of such magnificent and well-applied bounty.

'My desire no less than my duty now is to visit my benefactress,' said Graham, rising from his seat after some moments' silence.

'Yes,' answered the physician, 'that is the right thing to do. And let her see that the man who saved her life will do his best to prolong it and make the remainder of it happy.'

No. 2, Tapioca Terrace, was no longer the dolorous scene of heart-searchings and lamentations it had of late been. The complete

rehabilitation effected by the law,—set in motion by Mr. Clive,—was moral as well as material, for, not only was Fortune benign, but the portraits hanging side by side in the widow's bed-room no longer frowned upon her, and in her joy she called upon Susan to bear witness to a smile which played about the mouth of the defunct Sparragus, and a glance of conjugal tenderness which was visible in the painted eyes of the equally defunct Flinders. But Susan showed a becoming sense of propriety, and would admit nothing of the kind. Their eyes followed her about the room just the same as heretofore, and she did not like it a bit, and she recommended her mistress to go and look at poor, dear Miss Lena's face, which was worth a hundred of those old gentlemen—an estimate of comparative value which took the widow's breath away, and, before she was sufficiently recovered to reply, a knock at the door terminated the conversation. Susan, having peeped through the window, flew back to her mistress and whispered,

‘It's the young gent as saved you from being run over!’

‘Mr. Aspen?’

‘Yes, mem. Shall I fetch your new crape cap?’

‘No. Show him in at once.’

‘I have come, Mrs. Sparragus,’ said Graham, after being welcomed, ‘to thank you with all my heart for an act of extraordinary generosity which your solicitors inform me you propose to do.’

‘If I may,’ replied Mrs. Sparragus, almost appealingly; ‘my fear has been that, as you discouraged my thanks when I owed you my life, you might reject them now that they take shape in something beyond words. Say you accept Flinders.’

‘I accept your splendid gift with all the gratitude I am capable of.’

Mrs. Sparragus’s emotion could not be repressed. She burst into tears—tears of unaffected joy.

Aspen eventually explained the scheme proposed by Dr. Eustace, and backed by his noble endowment, and he added that Flinders, which would be the home of everything he held dear in this world, needed one presence to make it complete.

‘Of course you will marry some worthy girl, and then your happiness will be perfect,’ ventured Mrs. Sparragus, sympathetically.

‘Yes, it will be perfect if the friend to whom I owe so much is there to witness it.’

‘Dr. Eustace?’

‘No; Mrs. Sparragus. I ask you to make your home at the Hermitage, so that I may be as a son and my wife as a daughter to you.’

Mrs. Sparragus could scarcely articulate words of assent, so great was the commotion of joy in her heart, and Aspen’s attention was diverted from her by a distinct and palpable sound outside the door like the clapping of hands. Mrs. Sparragus was too agitated to explain the phenomenon, and Aspen could only conceive it to be some kind of spirit manifestation.

A year has elapsed. The interval between spring and spring is long enough to test most human projects, promises and professions, and the year which has elapsed has witnessed the growth and maturing of the several interests with which this history deals. Sincerity, energy, and solid worth have ripened to happy issues, as

only such qualities can, and the fruit is sweet for those whose privilege it is to gather, to taste, and to distribute.

Flinders, the healthful hobby of the inventor of the innocuous pill, has been transformed into an ideal school. It is become the birth-place and the home of creative art. Already the known talent of Graham Aspen (remembered for his success in many an academic contest) has caused not a few earnest votaries of the painter's craft to rally to his classes; already Jem Starkie has shown the daring and the strength of original power, impatient of the restrictions of traditionary methods and orthodox routine; already under these two guiding forces Flinders is unique, and is destined to be famous as the Alma Mater of a great revival in British Art.

Other enterprises too have ripened under the benign suns of nature and fitness. Jem's patient and persistent initiation of Ethel in the mysteries of the zither resulted in the production of perfect harmony,—the harmony of hearts in close accord: and precisely the same effect was consequent on Graham's philosophical study of

Hester—unison which pleads for union ; and, in fact, the day has arrived fraught with hopes in which even Flinders is not included, for a double wedding has been celebrated at St. Peter's Church, Eaton Square, at which the two fast friends figured as principals, besides two maidens of singular grace and beauty ; and, as Graham with Hester on his arm, and Jem with Ethel clinging to him, walked slowly and joyfully down the aisle to the inspiring swell of the organ and jubilant chant of voices, fervent though silent benedictions followed them from the hearts of Mr. Clive, Dr. Eustace, Mrs. Tierney, and Mrs. Sparragus.

And those faithful friends will witness the realisation of their wishes, for in the fulness of time the brides of to-day will be as daughters to Mrs. Sparragus, whose initial act has helped to bring about the blessed consummation, for the good widow has already fixed her home at the Hermitage, under the care and guardianship of the faithful Susan (whose little weakness for listening at keyholes for her mistress's protection is no longer necessary, for none but trusted friends ever visit her now) ;

and, despite the trials of the past, she already finds that peace and happiness are attainable when the heart is in the right place.

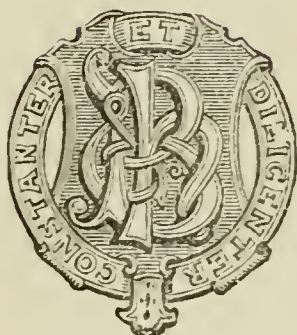
The last heard of Mrs. Lipperty was that she had been gazetted a colonel in the Salvation Army at Herne Bay ; but she proved herself such a moral martinet to the unfortunate victims under her command, to say nothing of the public at large, that they talked of petitioning the Commander-in-Chief to have her drummed out of the regiment as an insufferable nuisance.

Major Twister occupied chambers near his club, but one day he suddenly paid his account and vacated, to the amazement and indignation of the landlord, who had, with a view to the greater comfort of the major, that very morning instituted a boy in buttons to wait on him.

THE END.

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